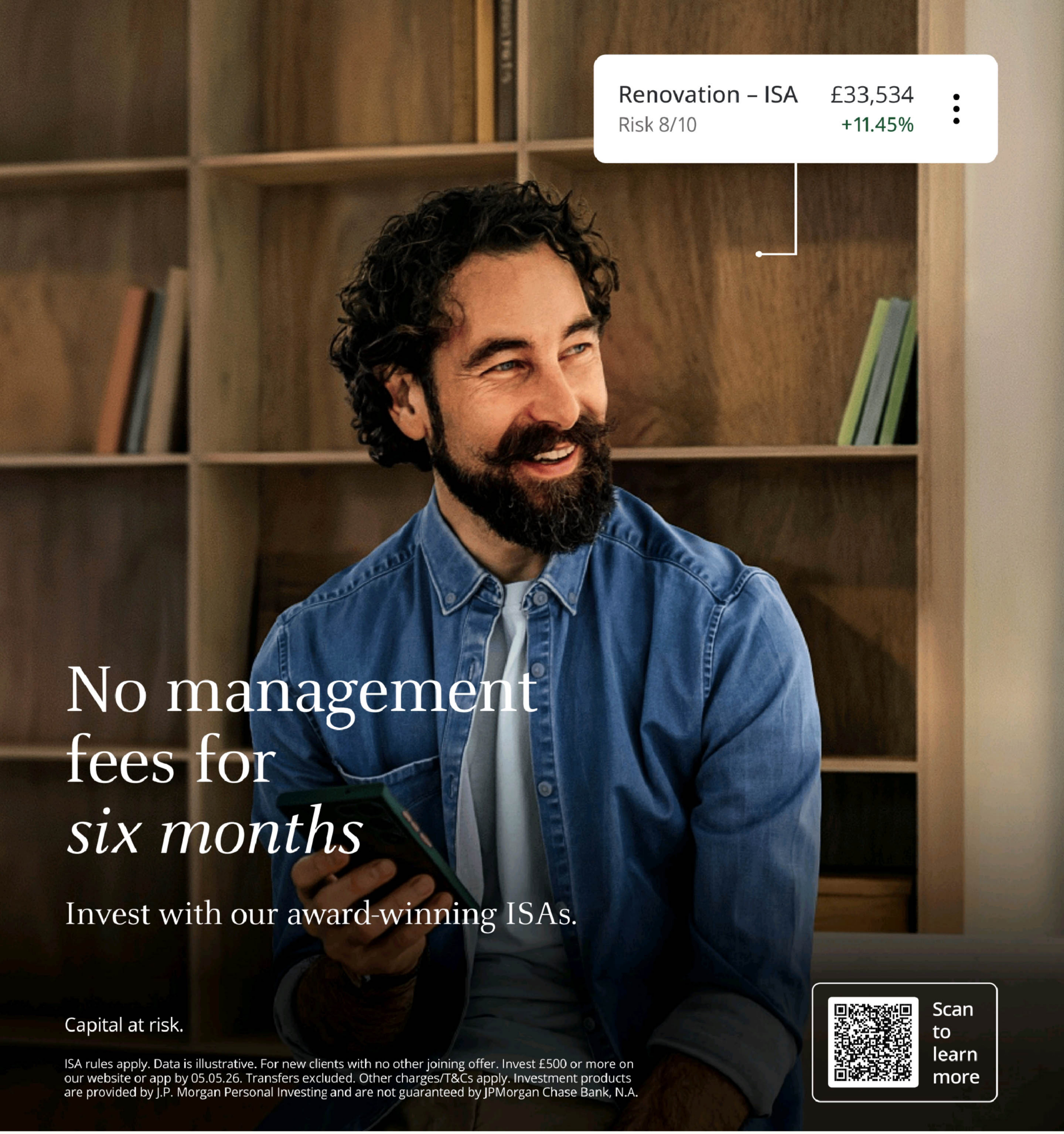
FEBRUARY 21 2026

FT Weekend Magazine

THEY CLONE HORSES, DON'T THEY?

Polo's peculiar next frontier.
By Samantha Weinberg



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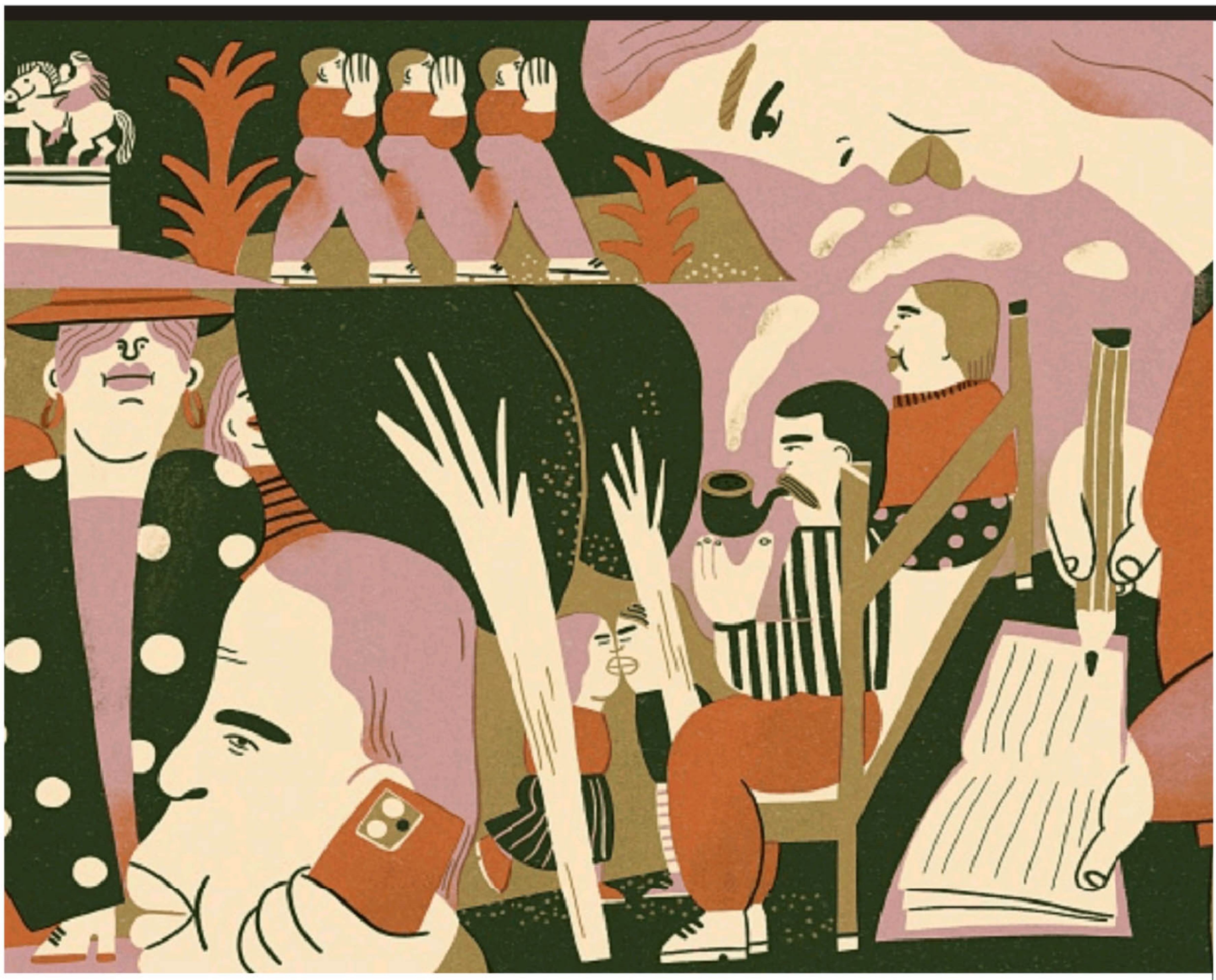

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FT Weekend Magazine Issue number 1,164 FT.com/magazine • **@FTMag** FT Weekend Magazine is printed by Roularta Media Group in Belgium and published by The Financial Times Ltd, Bracken House, 1 Friday Street, London EC4M 9BT.
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Publishing Dorota Gwilliam – Global Director, Luxury & Weekend Portfolio – dorota.gwilliam@ft.com Isaac Peltz – Commercial sales & product manager – isaac.peltz@ft.com. Sadia Choudhury – Advertising sales executive – sadia.choudhury@ft.com **Production** Mark Frisby – Advertising production – mark.frisby@ft.com/magscopy@ft.com

Letters

A MAPS SPECIAL ISSUE

by Oliver Roeder, Jana Tauschinski and Alan Smith

I very much enjoyed your special on maps but was disappointed that, when discussing the distortions of map projections, you did not say that Tissot called his circles "indicatrices", one of the best words in the English language.

SIMON SPIRO, LONDON

I've a life-long fascination with maps and have an extensive atlas collection. Digital maps fail to capture the details like terrain that a good paper map can. Google, Apple and maps.me are handy when travelling but I miss the beauty and details offered by the finer paper road maps like Michelin.

DINTORONTO VIA FT.COM

This is a big blind spot for most. The map has always been changing. One of the problems of the present is people think it will last in perpetuity. Change of the world map is one of the few constants of human history. Today is no different because we have electronics.

GRIFFINB VIA FT.COM

Thank you for a truly original and fascinating article! You only have to look at the headlines about Ukraine on today's front page of the FT to see the relevance: the latest from a wholly avoidable war that has already resulted in horrific casualties.

MARCUSA VIA FT.COM

Now when will the FT run a competition on what the postwar boundaries after World War Three will look like? May I suggest the prize of two packets of rice and some iodine pills?

IONA FAST-CAR VIA FT.COM

Fascinating read and brought to life by the human stories. My mother was Silesian, but that's a different war and a different story. Nonetheless, it made the article resonate even more. My father was from Palestine, where the powers are busy trying to redraw west Asia now. *Plus ça change*... Maybe the FT could run another competition there?

A RETIRED UNIVERSITY LECTURER VIA FT.COM

Very illuminating perspective, well done to the FT team involved. For many British baby boomers, the study of the first world war was also an introduction to the geography of Europe, perhaps later reinforced by an interest in Old World wines. Indeed, the latter appreciation notably continues.

AECOSTAIN VIA FT.COM

The competition map is telling as much for what it excluded as for what it included. As the FT acknowledged in 1921, nobody in 1914 would have predicted the collapse of the Russian empire. Equally, nobody in 1914 would have predicted the separation of Ireland from the UK. Neither was even on the map.

KIERAN VIA FT.COM

There is one crown stone marking the border between Pennsylvania and Maryland in Lancaster county, where I live. Its location, deep in the woods, lost to the annals of history. But not to all...

My old friend Jim (now 102), who used to be police chief in the 1950s, and I (25 at the time) both history buffs, took a day off work and trudged into the woods.

When we located the spot, we could see where the stone had been. In fact, the location was within feet of the GPS-confirmed state border.

The stone itself was, alas, missing. There were backhoe tracks in the woods and it appears that some enterprising individual had dug up our history. I'd still like to find that crown stone, and I really enjoyed this article.

MYHEADHURTS VIA FT.COM

STOP SENDING ME WHATSAPPS

by Tim Harford

The worst is definitely voice messages... like when somebody sends you a five-minute voicemail that you could have read in 20 seconds. The sender is saving time by putting it on you.

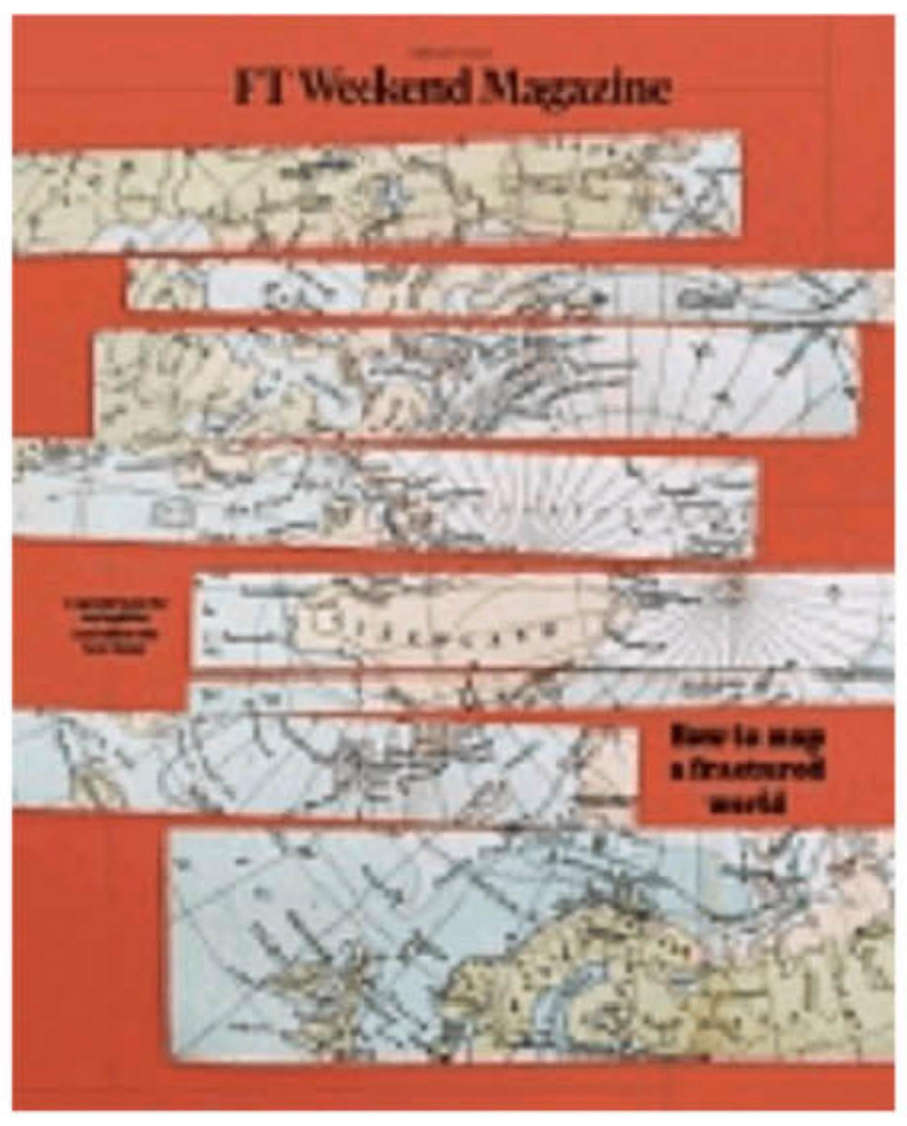
JIMMY1988 VIA FT.COM

I refuse to have a heart attack for other people's cheeseburgers. I don't have a smartphone, and I don't use apps from American technology companies. So I force people to email me and sometimes phone or text.

KATMANTWO VIA FT.COM

I love a good rant as much as the next person, but this all reads as very defensive. Welcome to society, my friend! Just silence those notifications, and answer them when you want. Being "mad that it happens at all" is a great way to live in constant frustration.

PURGATORIAL VIA FT.COM



FEBRUARY 14
MAP SPECIAL

TO CONTRIBUTE
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THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT THE GREAT FERTILITY COLLAPSE

by Simon Kuper

With respect to Simon Kuper's view, I suspect the next serious pandemic will speed up the depopulation process, helped by US negative policy towards vaccines and medical research.

PAUL PERLIN, LONDON

Europe in 1350 lost perhaps 30-50 per cent of its population, yet the survivors of the Black Death were disproportionately children, adolescents and healthy working-age adults. Today's contraction is the opposite. It is driven by sub-replacement fertility and rising longevity, producing populations that are older, sicker and shrinking from the bottom.

MISTER MISTER VIA FT.COM

The article tells only one half of the Black Death story. In the west of Europe, and nowhere more than in England, shortage of labour led to wage increases and better living conditions. In the east, and nowhere more than in Russia, it led to a tightening of the screws: enslaving people and more servitude.

SOUTHWEST ECONOMIST VIA FT.COM

RECIPES WITH ORANGES

by Honey & Co

That crème caramel recipe looks like a winner. But my tip is to pour some of the hot milk into the beaten egg mixture first and whisk, before adding the rest. Also, no vanilla? I would add a scant teaspoon of good vanilla paste. It complements every flavour.

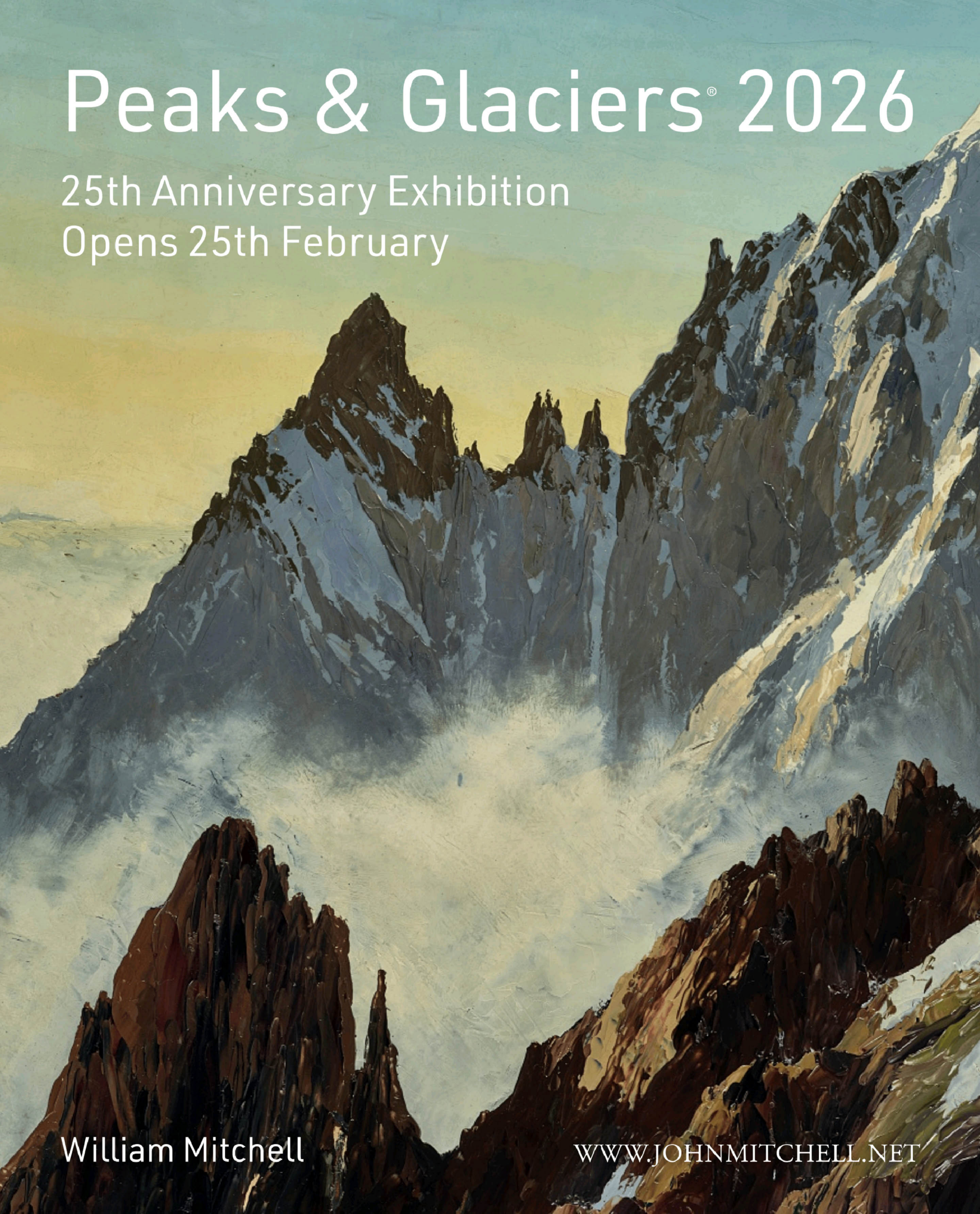
BOTANYWHIG VIA FT.COM

SHOULD RESTAURANTS CRACK DOWN ON THE ELDERLY?

by Robert Shrimsley

We have never been disturbed or irritated by children behaving badly in restaurants. Dogs in restaurants, however, are another matter.

BEN BRADSHAW, SICILY



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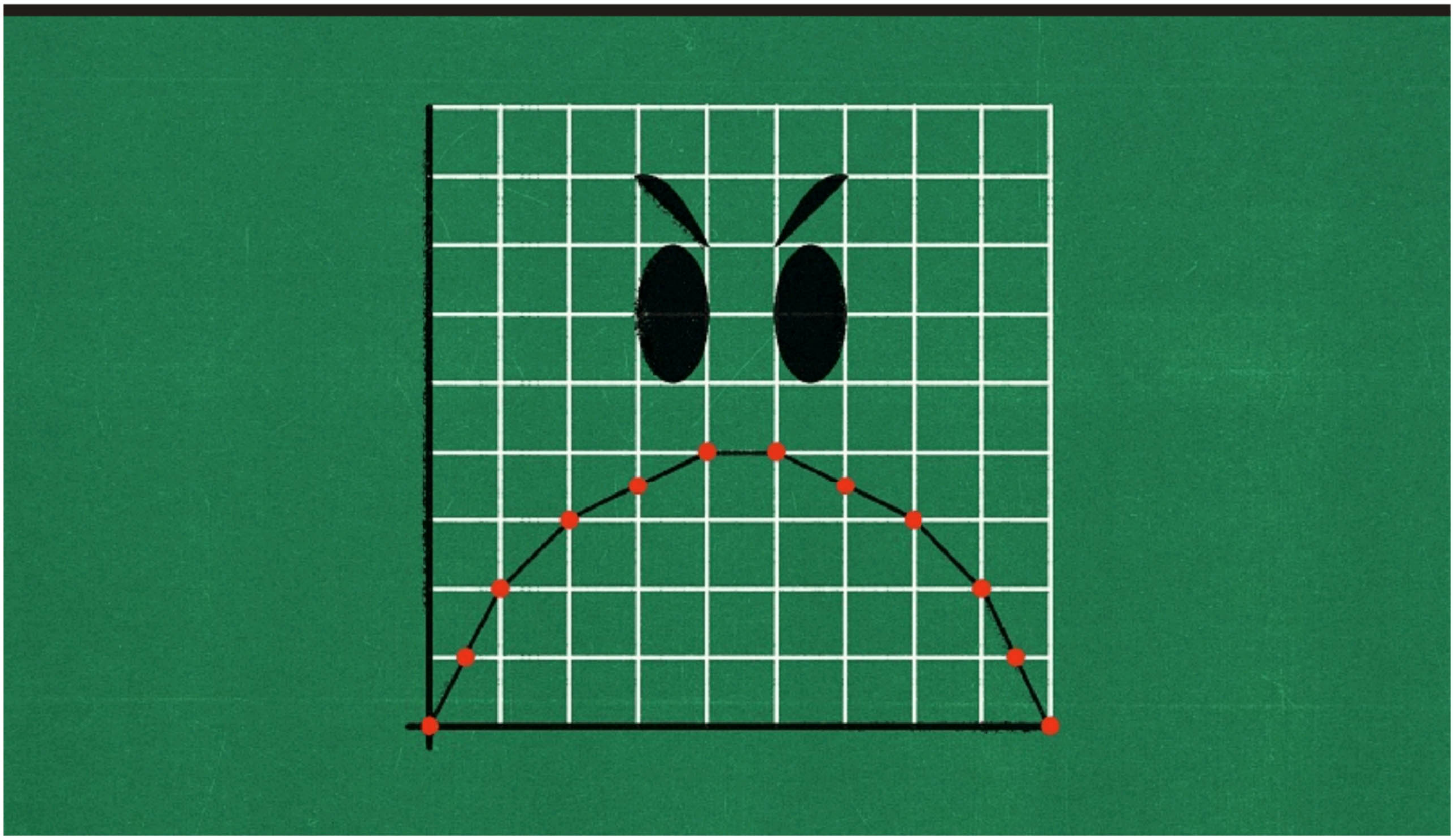

Undercover Economist

Low growth and high ideals

by TIM HARFORD

ILLUSTRATION by ALBERTO MIRANDA

If the 21st century has produced a more prescient book, I've not seen it. I'm thinking of *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*, by Harvard economics professor Benjamin Friedman. The book was published in late 2005, making it the same age as this column.

Friedman's argument was wide-ranging but the bottom line is easy to summarise: "Economic growth – meaning a rising standard of living for the clear majority of citizens – more often than not fosters greater opportunity, tolerance of diversity, social mobility, commitment to fairness, and dedication to democracy."

Friedman noted that a thriving economy might have a number of welcome side-effects, consequences which we might call moral progress. For example, if jobs were plentiful and workers were scarce, discrimination on the grounds of race, sex or religion "most often gives way to the sheer need to get the work done".

Yet for Friedman, the key to unlocking the virtues he admired was not jobs but an increase in broad-based material living standards, which is measured – or at least proxied

– by GDP per person. He argued that we naturally judge how things are going by making comparisons, and two types of comparison are readily available. The first is to compare ourselves with others. The second is to compare our current situation with our own past experiences. If living standards were briskly increasing, then we would notice that we were comfortably richer than we had been a decade ago. If living standards were stagnating or falling, then we would stop making contended comparisons with our former selves, and our envious gazes would turn to the lives of others.

Such zero-sum thinking is likely to be toxic and counter-productive. After all, as Friedman writes, "Nothing can enable the majority of the population to be better off than everyone else. But not only is it possible for most people to be better off than they used to be, that is precisely what economic growth means."

At the time, Friedman was criticised from the left for being too reductive about what economic progress meant (what about inequality? What about environmental sustainability?) and from the libertarian right for confusing moral progress with centrist ideals such as an inclusive, redistributive welfare state (what about rewarding excellence? What about freedom?).

These critiques have lost their bite. The events of the past two decades have proved that on the big questions, Friedman was unnervingly, tragically correct. The 21st century has been an era of economic trauma, and the consequences for our attitudes and our politics have become all too obvious.

> When economic growth sags, it doesn't just change what we can afford – it changes what we value

The US economy has certainly grown over the past 25 years, but the growth has been uneven, uncertain and repeatedly interrupted. The century began with the unnerving popping of the dotcom bubble, followed by the post-9/11 recession, which blurred into the "China shock", an influx of Chinese imports that for a few years inflicted localised but traumatic damage on US communities dependent on manufacturing. All that was made to look tame by the banking crisis of 2007-08, which depressed growth rates for years afterwards, as well as draining the US economic system of legitimacy. The final one-two punch was the Covid-19 lockdown followed by the surge in inflation of the past few years.

What does all this drama look like in the economic data? Simple. Over the quarter-century beginning in 1950, real GDP per person grew almost 80 per cent. Over the following quarter-century, 1975-1999, real growth per person was again just under 80 per cent. But from 2000-2024, total real growth per person halved, to just under 40 per cent.

Or consider the experience of the finance-heavy UK economy, in which the banking crisis looms even larger. That crisis was followed by an anaemic recovery – not helped by the tax rises and spending cuts of the coalition government – and then, in 2016, the vote for Brexit. The data, again, tells the story: between the peak of 2007 and the last full year before the referendum, 2015, the UK's real economic output per person grew by a grand total of 1 per cent. Since 2016 the average is still well short of 1 per cent a year. For context, in the 1990s, real per capita growth was more like 1 per cent every six months.

Friedman's basic thesis was that robust, broad-based growth would encourage tolerance, social mobility, fairness and a commitment to democratic values. Should we be surprised that an economic slowdown has given us the opposite?

Since *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth* was published, economists have investigated its thesis with a more quantitative lens. Lewis Davis and Matthew Knauss looked at more than 80 countries between 1989 and 2007. They found that people were more eager for governments to "take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for" where the growth rate had recently been rising and income inequality had recently been falling.

That's an intriguing finding, particularly the counterintuitive proposition that people want more government provision in places where income inequality is falling. And not everyone would agree that there is anything "moral" about wanting government to take a bigger role as a provider. Still, it is striking that Davis and Knauss find that in economies that are misfiring, with falling growth and rising inequality, the typical response is: every man for himself.

In January, Timothy Besley, Christopher Dann and Sacha Dray published a study of "Growth Experiences and Trust in Government", and concluded that individuals who had experienced higher GDP growth since they were born "are more prone to trust their governments". Again, trusting your government is not quite the same thing as moral rectitude, but Besley and colleagues are pointing to some of the same fundamental issues as Friedman was: when economic growth sags, it doesn't just change what we can afford – it changes what we value, what we believe and who we trust.

We shouldn't be reductive about this link between material flourishing and moral flourishing. There are certainly moments, such as the Great Depression in the US, when both the government and the people seemed to rise to the challenge rather than sinking into infighting and recrimination. And the increasing power and attention given to unsavoury political characters around the democratic world is surely about more than merely low growth. Still: low growth matters, not just because it empties out our shopping bags, but because it hollows out our character. **FT**

DEPARTMENTS

REPORTS *from* LESSER-KNOWN FT BUREAUX

FOOTWEAR

Mr Magnolia's possessions

He has:

- An old trumpet that goes rooty-toot; two lovely sisters who play on the flute; in his pond, a frog and a toad and a newt; green parakeets who pick holes in his suit; some very fat owls who are learning to hoot; a scooter; fruit, for juggling; a purple dinosaur (what a magnificent brute!)

He does not have:

- A second boot, meaning he cannot go outside when it rains.

SOURCE: QUENTIN BLAKE, *MR MAGNOLIA*

LEXICON

Cats and dogs and pitchforks

Smirr: A Scottish word to describe a fine, drifting rain or drizzle. A "smirr" (or "smur" in parts of England) is so light it seems like a mist.
Mizzle: A misty drizzle. Commonly used in Devon and Cornwall, the word probably derives from the Low German *miseln* or Dutch word for drizzle, *miezelen*.
Letty: In Somerset, if it's "letty", there is just enough rain to make outdoor work difficult. From the old word "let" (meaning disallow).
Stoating: Rain so heavy that it bounces off the ground, after *stoat*, a Scottish word for bounce.
Coming down in stair rods: Used in the north of England to describe thick, straight, heavy rain.
Raining forks 'tiyunsdown'ards: In Lincolnshire, meanwhile, heavy rain is said to come down in fork tines, or prongs, pointing downwards.

SOURCE: BBC

LITERATURE

Weather watching in 1861

"It was wretched weather; stormy and wet, stormy and wet; and mud, mud, mud, deep in all the streets. Day after day, a vast heavy veil had been driving over London from the East, and it drove still, as if in the East there were an Eternity of cloud and wind."

SOURCE: CHARLES DICKENS, *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

LAST WEEK'S THEME: MAPMAKING

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GALLERY

DAVID JOHNSON

by FREYA ROGERS

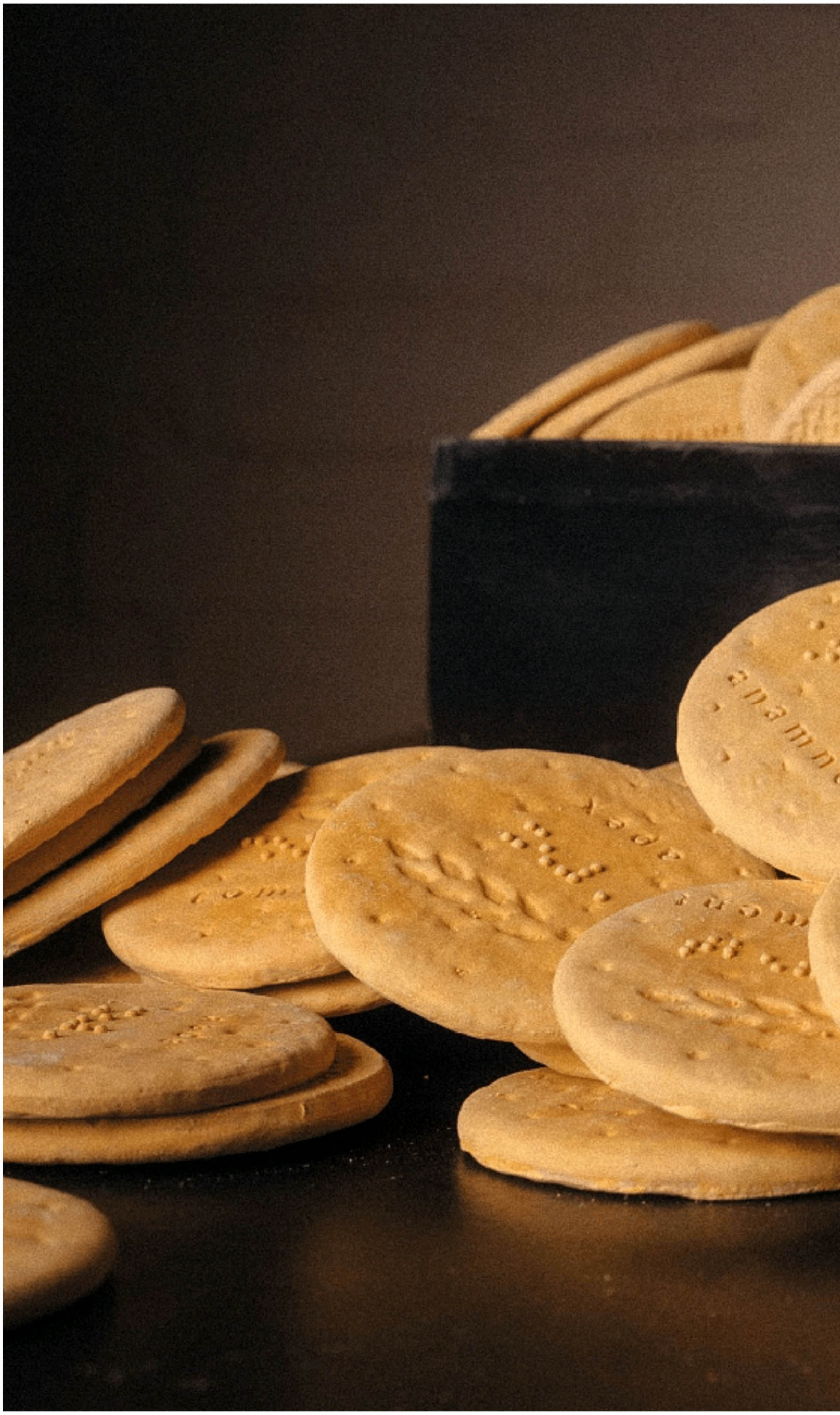
The UK's first major sculpture exhibition in which blind and partially sighted practitioners are central to the curatorial process, *Beyond the Visual* challenges the dominance of sight in the making and appreciation of art. The result of a groundbreaking research project, the exhibition at Leeds' Henry Moore Institute brings together historical and contemporary works by 16 international artists alongside seven new commissions. Its ambition is to change how museums and galleries engage with audiences by integrating accessibility at every stage of the creative process.

The exhibition's three-year research period included consultation with blind and partially blind communities, as well as public events and workshops. Many of the works emerged directly from this process, including David Johnson's "Nuggets of Embodiment", in which 10,000 digestive biscuit casts are embossed with Braille. Other works include Lenka Clayton's reimagining of Constantin Brâncuși's 1920 "Sculpture for the Blind" (a work that is nowadays presented behind glass, no longer able to be touched). Each work is accompanied by an audio description by the partially blind writer Joseph Rizzo Naudi.

"Most exhibitions routinely exclude blind or partially blind people with instructions not to touch the artwork," says Aaron McPeake, co-investigator and co-curator. His piece "Rings" invites audiences to explore sound, touch and smell, and he encourages me to strike its suspended bronze rings, taking note of the vibrations that ripple through the room. "Often, people aren't taught to use their senses," he says. Striking the largest ring, he muses, "Church bells ring sharply on a cold day."

The exhibition is an ode to Henry Moore, who was an advocate for sculpture as a tactile experience. The project's principal investigator Ken Wilder, who is sighted, reflects on what he has learnt about "blindness gain", a theory that challenges the hierarchy of senses, reframing sight loss as a source of creativity rather than a problem to be solved. "When we invite engagement through multiple senses," he says, "it enriches appreciation for all." FT

"Beyond the Visual" is at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds until April 19. The fully accessible book "Beyond the Visual: Multisensory Modes of Beholding Art" is available now



'NUGGETS OF EMBODIMENT', 2025. PHOTOGRAPH: ROB HILL

World View

Cracks in the system

by SIMON KUPER

ILLUSTRATION *by* HARRY HAYSOM

The Briton getting most attention in the Epstein files is Peter Mandelson. As a minister during the global financial crisis, he allegedly emailed sensitive information to his paymaster Jeffrey Epstein. But having written a book about British political corruption, *Good Chaps* (2024), I see Mandelson as just another rotten apple on a rotten tree.

There's an unrelated document in the files that I think encapsulates the UK's peculiar vulnerabilities. It's Epstein's exchange with Donald Trump's strategist Steve Bannon about far-right British activist Tommy Robinson. "'Backbone of England,'" quotes Bannon, ironically. "Thats why the pound so low," replies Epstein. "Cheap @ any price," agrees Bannon.

Britain's political system is exceptionally vulnerable to corruption by foreigners, because it's cheap to buy, under-regulated, conducted in the global language and worth buying. The UK is still the world's sixth-largest economy, sixth-biggest military spender and a soft-power superpower. No wonder Britain has hit an all-time low in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.

British politics has a small-money problem. Whereas an Abu Dhabi royal paid $500mn into the Trump family's crypto venture, Epstein sent Mandelson $75,000. The fall in ministerial salaries by about a quarter since 2010 helps keep Westminster cheap.

Even buying into the royal family's prestige is affordable. Before Charles became king, Qatar's former prime minister handed him €3mn in legal donations for his charities, in cash.

Russians led foreign investment in Westminster until the sanctions of 2022. As late as 2021, the Russian-owned company Megahertz helped build a press briefing room in 9 Downing Street, installing computers, cameras and a control desk.

But many other countries attempt political FDI. The influential Tony Blair Institute took Saudi donations. (When I met Mandelson at his aptly named lobbying firm Global Counsel in 2019, he complained that Blair's money-grubbing tarnished blameless former associates such as himself.)

Another ex-premier, David Cameron, tried to go into business with the Chinese state. He discussed his planned UK-China fund (meant to be worth $1bn) over dinner with Xi Jinping, and solicited investment from China's sovereign wealth fund. A British parliamentary committee speculated later that Cameron's role in the fund was "in some part engineered by the Chinese state to lend credibility to Chinese investment". Beijing must have been pleased when he became foreign secretary. Deeper insight into Chinese influence was denied after a trial of Britons allegedly spying for China collapsed in December, because the government wouldn't testify that the world's second economy was a "threat to national security". The two men have maintained their innocence.

> It has long been unclear just what a minister would need to do to get arrested

Meanwhile, leading Americans take a more emotional interest in Britain. A former British spy chief explains that Trump and Elon Musk dislike today's multicultural UK partly because they feel attached to their white ancestral homeland.

All these actors offer temptations. Reform UK's leader Nigel Farage said in 2024 that Musk was considering donating to the far-right party. Even that unfulfilled promise could encourage Reform to align with Musk's views. Actual donors investing in political parties drove spending in the 2024 general election to a record £94.5mn.

British politics is also vulnerable because it isn't, in practice, governed by the rule of law. Instead, there's a code of honour, premised on the ancient notion that politicians are "good chaps". They're supposed to reject dodgy donations and cash for peerages, but lapses are rarely punished. It has long been unclear just what a minister would need to do to get arrested.

That may be changing. Police are investigating Mandelson (who has denied wrongdoing). His scandal could prompt a British reset. The Representation of the People Bill now before parliament intends, among other things, a gentle cleansing of foreign donations. The Rycroft inquiry into foreign financial interference in politics – commissioned after ex-Welsh Reform leader Nathan Gill was jailed for taking Russian bribes – reports next month.

Stronger laws are essential. Trust in British politics is at a low. That favours the self-proclaimed outsiders of Reform. As Britain's opposition leader lamented in 2024: "After the sex scandals, the expenses scandals, the waste scandals, the contracts for friends... people have looked at us and concluded we're all just in it for ourselves." Keir Starmer now needs to listen to himself. FT

ELIZABETH HARROD & STEVEN MCRAE, SOLOIST & PRINCIPAL, THE ROYAL BALLET

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Essay

Real talk

What I learnt from a day of eavesdropping on other people's conversations. By *Amelia Tait*

ILLUSTRATION *by* GIULIA DALL'ARA

I'm definitely going to lie to my children about my inheritance," I overhear a thirtysomething finance bro in designer sunglasses say while sitting on the grass in St James's Square one hot, bright lunchtime in early July. Later that night, just after 11pm on Charing Cross Road, I listen as a homeless man with a face of tattoos turns to his friend and asks, "Have you got 10 pence, mate? I've been out three hours... someone gave me a loaf of bread, mate, f*** that."

I suppose technically I didn't "overhear" anything. There was nothing accidental about how I'd spent that day: I walked 36,512 steps across London, deliberately listening in on people's conversations, and diligently scribbling down what I discovered. Over the course of those 15 hours, I filled 34 pages in a notebook and sent myself 61 emails (because typing is more inconspicuous than pulling out a pencil). Is eavesdropping like that unethical? Yes, and in certain circumstances it can even be illegal.

But I was inspired by the long-dead New York eccentric Joe Gould. Between the 1910s and the 1940s, he listened to more than 20,000 everyday conversations and began compiling them into the longest book ever written, *An Oral History of the Contemporary World*. At least, that's what Gould claimed. For 60 years, debate has raged about whether or not his book did exist – but regardless, I've always thought the idea was sound. Gould believed that meaning could be found in "lyrical episodes of everyday life". He was motivated by a line from the poet WB Yeats: "The history of a nation is not in parliaments and battlefields, but in what the people say to each other on fair days and high days."

It sounds great, but I wanted to find out if it was actually true, if I could discover something about us – or now, or us right now – simply by eavesdropping. And of course, like most eavesdroppers, I wanted to be titillated and I wanted to laugh. I wasn't an artist foraging for a "found poem", or a screenwriter searching for dialogue, but nor was I one of the 381,000 people who follow the Instagram account "Overheard London". I was just someone prepared to do the dirty (and often tedious) work of studying strangers, in the hope of finding some hitherto unknown insight on a blazing hot day.

I START EAVESDROPPING AT 8.15AM, ON A train platform completely silent but for coughing and beeping. Once on the train, two young women who look dressed for a night out offer up tantalising snippets that make me want to demand context: "That girl's moving mad... especially because I know her as well"; "He's shaped like a Nik Nak!"

For most of the morning, short conversational scraps like this are all that I gather: "I'm glad you're here," says a man to his partner as they psych themselves up for a meeting in Canary Wharf just before 9am. Nearby, one young person coaches another as he changes from his trainers into smart shoes: "You're on your way, you're not there yet."

Although I'd normally leave a respectable three-table distance between myself and other breakfasters in Leon, this morning I plonk my tray on a table next to two workmen. One is video-calling someone. The other is playing a game on his phone. The video-caller says a man named Nathan is going to get fired if he doesn't start showing up on time, but "it is what it is". He then turns his screen to the game-player who proudly holds up his own phone to the person on the other end of the call.

"See my level on the top right corner: level 49!" he crows, before launching into a description of his chest-pressing regime, followed by a re-enactment of a conversation at the gym. "I said: 'How much do you weigh?' He said: '80 kilo.' I said: 'I could bench press you.'"

When I spot a café on Southwark Street offering "Red Bull infusions" at around 11am, I know I've found a place where people will speak freely. After just a short time eavesdropping, I'm already aware that British people complain in hushed tones – we don't shit talk, we shit whisper. Americans, praise the Lord, shit shout.

"She's beyond inappropriate," says one such American woman. "She was inappropriate with me!" replies her co-worker. From what I can gather, they're speaking about a former colleague who told near-strangers at a work function that she was attracted to Middle Eastern men. And yet the colleague got a good severance package. "They wanted her to go quietly, I think it was three – it was three or six months." They move on to gossiping about a different colleague: "She was having mental breakdowns daily. I was like: 'Sandra, you need to be less desperate.'"

A little while later, another group of office workers have a meeting (or as their boss puts it, "chill chat") on some benches in Bernie Spain Gardens. One team member remarks on the dead, brown grass. "Heatwave, I guess," offers another.

AS A JOURNALIST, I'VE FOUND TIME AND time again that real life rejects narrative sense. You can try to put a story in order and give people easily understandable motives but, for the most part, we do not move from A to B; we move in nonsensical, unexplainable ways. You might think, for example, that if two delivery men in hi-viz jackets almost drop a commercial fridge on a bollard, the co-worker supervising would have more to say than, "OK, you're good." But why should he? He's not in a movie – he wasn't even in a scene until I put him in one.

By the time I hit 10,000 steps, I've witnessed this scene, as well as a seafarer-themed scavenger hunt on the Southbank. But it's St James's Square that really delivers – here is where I encounter the man who is planning to lie to his children about his inheritance.

"If they ask, then I'll help them pay for uni and start a business," he says, "and then when they're old enough, I will tell them." He is speaking to a silver-haired companion whose voice I can't hear. "She's bad at communicating her dreams, because I was very nice, I asked her," inheritance man says of a woman. I feel, from something in

his tone, he's talking about his sister, but I have no real way of knowing. Of another woman – or possibly the same one – he wonders kindly: "Do you think it would be better to give her the company? I think she wouldn't like it."

As I leave the gardens, a man in a polo shirt sits down next to a workman smoking on a bench, and the latter lowers his cigarette. The polo-wearer says it's OK, "You were here first." The smoker replies, "It doesn't matter, not my park, not my bench." This feels tantalisingly close to Gould's promise – am I at last finding something resembling meaning? Perhaps, but I soon find more enjoyment in the meaningless. At around 4pm in St James's Park, I overhear an inquisitive child. "What's that? A duck?" he asks, pointing at a goose.

> Men are louder than women, Americans are louder than us all

I assume that Wetherspoons will be the perfect place to dig a bit deeper, but it's too loud and too expected: "If you're flying around London with an Afghani flag, you're just an idiot." There are more intriguing conversations floating past from other tables: "Me, I did bad stuff when I was younger but then I stopped", "She needs to get a jaw reconstruction because it's so bad, she's worn away all the cartilage."

I begin to worry that what I'm discovering about the world from my eavesdropping is mostly things we already know: men are louder than women; Americans are louder than us all; people love to complain about other people named Charlotte. My curiosity is satiated but I also feel disappointed. Barely anyone says anything unexpected, which is why I'm delighted to hear the following non sequitur in The NoMad hotel at around 7pm. "I went to Venice and when I got off the plane it was like I had a hair dryer in front of my face… Still, we don't have the war so I can't complain."

Immersed in other people's thoughts, I miss my own – or at least I do until I walk down the street and hear a group of friends with spritzes outside a pub: "Welcome to the class of ho", "I want a PhD in ho!", "I want an MBA in ho!" I expect to strike gold as a guest in a private members' club but hear absolutely nothing – fair play, they really are private. In Soho's The Coach & Horses just before 11pm, two people are making out ferociously while two others talk about Gaza. There are no lovers' tiffs or secrets spilled. Walking to the train station, I hear the tattooed homeless man complain about his loaf of bread, and when I get off the train, someone else gets in my Uber. When the driver says, "Amelia?", they say, "Yes", even though that is not true. Waving in front of the windscreen sorts it out.

Bitches, boasts, begs – I should've come away enlightened, with something to say, not just something to recount. Maybe I could squeeze out profundity like juice from a withered lemon: after all, I did hear a man at 8pm-ish declare, "I love these nights, I don't have to think about anything, I just follow where everyone else goes."

I listened to Londoners discuss artificial intelligence, Israel and the sentencing of P Diddy, but aside from the specificity of those topics they could've been anyone, in any place, at any time: a city of rich people and poor people, gossiping and bragging.

Perhaps we can't extract meaning from snatches of dialogue and isolated moments stripped of context – or at least, I can't build them into a neat conclusion. Often, when I heard something I thought was juicy or profound, the next utterance revealed I'd misunderstood it (I was thrilled to hear about someone's jailbreaking associate, before I realised they were actually discussing a documentary).

I'm left feeling that, much as we'd like to believe otherwise, we can't dissect people from a distance, at least not successfully. We actually have to engage with people to come away knowing something new. Meaning is found in participation, not observation alone.

I think again about Yeats's quote and wonder: did I overhear what people spoke about on the cusp of world war three, or was it just a random day in July? On the whole, no one said anything that truly mattered to anyone but them – and, rather unwelcomely, me.

Dispatch

Dinosaurs in the desert

Paleontologists battle poachers and collectors in Mongolia.

By *Stephanie Findlay*

THE FLAMING CLIFFS, A FAMOUS PALEONTOLOGICAL SITE IN MONGOLIA'S GOBI DESERT

The tracks in the red sandstone told a story. They showed that a pair of Sauropods, giant dinosaurs with long necks, had walked here side by side more than 80 million years ago. "Think of them interacting like a family of elephants," said Mainbayar Buuvei, squatting low to the ground to trace the outline of a footprint with his finger.

The footprints were deep – more like moulds made by the weight of the dinosaurs pressing into the soft, muddy ground. Those impressions were then filled with leaves and dirt, which had hardened to create a natural cast of the dinosaur's foot. "You can see the skin and a nail," said Buuvei, showing a claw on the side of the footprint.

It was late afternoon in August at the Khongil site in the Gobi desert of Mongolia, where the stony ground yielded to an outcrop of craggy red sandstone holding the fossils and footprints. The Gobi is one of the world's richest paleontological regions. Some of the most well-known dinosaurs were discovered here: the speedy Velociraptors of *Jurassic Park* fame and the strange humpbacked Deinocheirus with freakishly huge claws.

But there are thieves in the vast steppelands too. Fossil poachers have for decades been looting bones from the unprotected land to sell on the black market. Buuvei's 18-year career as a paleontologist in Mongolia has given him insights into the poachers' brutal methods. He's come across headless skeletons and smashed bones where poachers have used dynamite to blow up sites to reveal their loot.

"Along with discoveries, there were always illicit digs, trash and destruction left behind," said the 42-year-old, who is working on his doctorate in paleobiology at the National University of Mongolia. "I don't like talking about them, because I consider it one of the greatest crimes against nature and humanity."

It's illegal to sell Mongolian fossils but occasionally specimens do surface from the black market. In 2007, Nicolas Cage reportedly paid $276,000 to outbid Leonardo DiCaprio for the skull of a Tarbosaurus bataar, a carnivore nearly as large as a Tyrannosaurus rex. In 2015, he returned it to Mongolia voluntarily after the US Department of Homeland Security informed him it might have been stolen.

Paleontologists argue that the commercial digging and sale of fossils is a loss to science, making the specimens inaccessible. The commercial dealers say as long as they follow the rules, there is nothing wrong with free trade in the fossils. Prices are climbing higher. In 2024, hedge fund billionaire Ken Griffin paid more than $44.6mn for Apex, a 150-million-year-old Stegosaurus, in a fine art auction held by Sotheby's.

But for Buuvei, the fossils represent something more fundamental. They are an important part of the reclamation of Mongolia's cultural heritage, as the young democracy seeks to reinvent itself after decades as a de facto Soviet satellite state. The country of 3.5 million people only emerged from single-party socialist control in the 1990s.

"It is meaningful to do research here in Mongolia, on our own land. Because this is the history of the place where we were born and raised – fossils are Mongolia's origins, the animals and plants that once lived here," he said. "For me, what is special is that this research allows Mongolia, and Mongolian people, to be recognised worldwide."

A NEST OF DINOSAUR EGGS DISCOVERED AT THE FLAMING CLIFFS IN THE 1920S

Buuvei had just returned from more than a week at a remote site on the border with China on a joint expedition with some paleontologists from Japan. The group was on a high after uncovering prehistoric turtle and mammal fossils

In his black Toyota Land Cruiser, this Mongolian Indiana Jones was looking more paramilitary than colonial explorer, dressed in an all-khaki outfit, with a black baseball cap and navy-blue Crocs decorated with Kobe Bryant shoe charms. Other adventurers rolled into the site in a UAZ SGR, a brown Soviet-designed van ubiquitous in the country.

I had met Buuvei at a guesthouse close to where he grew up. A collection of six *gers* (the white circular tents traditionally used by the country's nomadic herders) were each furnished with three simple single beds. Herds of horses, sheep and goats roamed freely over the steppe. The first night I slept in the *ger*, I thought someone had turned on a flashlight. It took a moment before I realised it was the shining moon, appearing over the open hole at the top.

'It was a real Mecca to go there that first time… mixed with a real horror at seeing the extent of poaching'

Now we were deep in the desert, 10 minutes' drive away from the Flaming Cliffs. A famous paleontological site three hours from the city of Dalanzadgad, the Flaming Cliffs are a sacred site to some paleontologists. This was where the American explorer and paleontologist Roy Chapman Andrews discovered a nest of dinosaur eggs more than 100 years ago, revolutionising our understanding of how dinosaurs reproduced.

"The preservation is beautiful," Chapman Andrews wrote in his book *On the Trail of Man*. "Some of the eggs have been crushed, but the pebbled surface of the shells is as perfect as if the eggs had been laid yesterday." The fossilised eggs were front-page news in America, but the discovery almost immediately brought him into conflict with Mongolian authorities. In order to fund his next expedition, Chapman Andrews decided to auction one of the eggs. In 1924, a Colgate University trustee claimed it with a bid of $5,000. That year, Mongolia banned the sale of fossils.

The Flaming Cliffs may feel like a sacred site to some, but it is also a commercial one. There is a small arcade where vendors in open booths sell camel souvenirs, and a shop offering soft-serve goat's-milk ice cream and coffee. It was late afternoon by the time we arrived, and tour buses were pulling up to the entrance gate, which stood incongruous and alone, without any attached fencing. The light from the setting sun changed the colour of the cliffs from dusty brown to glowing pink.

Tourists are able to walk freely on the paleontological site. A group of young Koreans held hands and jumped in the air for a photo, uncomfortably close to the cliff edge. Older Europeans trundled past in shorts and heavy hiking boots.

"It's impressive," said Gianmarco Mastore, a man in his mid-forties from Milan who had come to Mongolia looking for "peace and silence and wide spaces with few people". He was enjoying imagining what had been here millions of years ago, "but it's just rocks now, all the bones are in New York".

MASTORE WAS NOT ENTIRELY CORRECT. UNDER Mongolian law, fossils cannot be exported though that had not stopped their sale in the past. But in 2012, a high-profile case marked a turning point. Fossil dealer Eric Prokopi was arrested in connection with a "scheme to illegally import dinosaur fossils into the US". He was ultimately convicted of conspiracy to smuggle illegal goods, possess stolen property and make false statements, and was jailed for three months. The US repatriated dozens of bones in his possession to Mongolia.

The government had torn down the Soviet-built paleontological building to make way for a museum dedicated to Genghis Khan, the war-

FROM LEFT: AMERICAN EXPLORER ROY CHAPMAN ANDREWS WITH A COLLEAGUE, A TARBOSAURUS BATAAR SKELETON AT MONGOLIA'S NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

rior who conquered Asia to the Adriatic Sea and established the great Mongol Empire, killing an estimated 40 million people in the process. So to house the fossils returned by the US, Mongolian authorities turned to the old Lenin museum in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar, which was converted into a Natural History Museum. Just over a decade later, those returned US specimens form the main exhibit.

Outside the museum early on a Saturday morning, people were setting up stalls to sell school supplies and knock-off Labubu dolls. Inside, the modest display betrays the fact that Mongolia is home to one of the greatest fossil deposits in the world. The third floor still houses a bronze cast celebrating communism, depicting Lenin, Marx and Engels, surrounded by taxidermied animals, such as the saker falcon and sand lizards.

But the main exhibit is a full skeleton of the Tarbosaurus bataar, recovered from Prokopi. Simple plaques detail the dinosaur's weight. "It's all American," said a museum worker in broken English.

The scale of the thefts in Mongolia has opened up a new avenue of paleontological research, where scientists are trying to match returned bones with the sites where they came from. Last September, Buuvei travelled with Phil Bell, a vertebrate paleontologist at the University of New England in Australia, to sites across the Gobi where fossils had been poached. They have their work cut out for them. There are hundreds of fossils waiting to be studied.

Bell had always wanted to travel to Mongolia. But his first experience when he arrived shocked him. "For me, it was a real Mecca to go there that first time, but mixed with a real horror at seeing the extent of poaching," he said. "There were a litany of nasties." Compared with other places where he works, Canada's badlands, for example, Mongolia does not have the resources to protect its natural treasures, he said.

Mongolia's economy is dependent on mining, with coal, copper and gold accounting for the bulk of its exports, making it vulnerable to swings in commodity prices. Nomadic herders are moving to the cities in search of a better life. The population of Ulaanbaatar has exploded in the past 24 years to around 1.7 million people, representing half of Mongolia's population.

In June, Mongolia's prime minister Luvsannamsrain Oyun-Erdene resigned after public outrage over his son's lavish lifestyle. Thousands of young protesters took to the streets of Ulaanbaatar, venting their frustration at widespread corruption and rising living costs.

One paleontologist I reached out to implied that the Mongolian Institute of Paleontology was tainted by such corruption. But Bell said that over the past decade the institute had been reformed. He cited the work of researchers including Zorigt Badamkhatan and Buuvei as a positive force. "There is a new generation," said Bell. "That's where the hope lies."

AS A BOY GROWING UP NEAR THE FLAMING Cliffs, Buuvei had thought the fossils were dragon bones. "Local people wouldn't touch them, they greatly respected them, we thought this was a dragon tomb," he said, as we drove to the next site.

Buuvei was driving with two of the Japanese researchers. Kentaro Chiba, a lecturer of vertebrate paleontology at the Okayama University of Science, said he was proudly "anti-carnivore" and was excited to visit a locality known for its herbivores. The conversation turned to the rising prices of fossils. "I definitely think it's a bad thing because I can't get access. But as long as it's legal [somewhere in the world], we can't stop it," said Chiba. "The best practice we can do is to make sure scientists and researchers can get digital casts of those commercial ones. Then the rich guys can enjoy their own fossils."

Chiba said that now museums around the world cannot afford fossils, adding it's a good thing that Griffin is loaning his specimen to the American Museum of Natural History. "But there's no guarantee other fossils coming out to auction next will go the same way."

The team drove up a hill to enjoy the expansive view of the plains, starting up the generator and turning on Starlink to access the internet. This was the first year that the paleontologists could get online while on a dig. "Thanks for the emails, Elon," someone quipped.

Camp was set up and meals that mostly involved sheep were cooked. The team had various injuries, one had injured his clavicle lifting a jacket, the name for a plaster cast filled with fossils. A senior geologist was wearing a back brace after years of work in the field. Chiba unpacked Japanese calligraphy brushes and ink. "It's amazing for writing on plaster," he said. He learnt the technique from a Japanese team who worked in Mongolia in the 1990s. "In Canada, I used Sharpies, but those things didn't work."

After lunch, we prepared to go out fossil hunting. The scientists each readied their own pack. Buuvei passed me a pick axe to dig.

I walked with Buuvei and Nyamjargal Javzandulam, a soft-spoken 28-year-old researcher studying dinosaur teeth. We were looking for bones or flakes of bones on the sandstone outcropping littered with gleaming, semitranslucent agate.

Buuvei picked something up, a little bone fragment that was matt white. It left a powdery residue on my finger. After a couple of hours, we returned to the camp, unsuccessful. Javzandulam was still happy to be out. "We are under the eternal blue sky," she said, raising her arms above her head, a reference to an ancient Mongolian deity.

Someone had got a call from a villager in the area that an Ankylosaurus skeleton, a large armoured dinosaur, was exposed. It was a prime specimen and was likely "fully articulate", which in paleontologist speak means it had all or most of its bones. That made it valuable both to the researchers and potential poachers.

Buuvei had made arrangements with the villagers to go and cover it. "We need much more resources as well as time and effort to excavate the full skeleton," he said. "For now, we will bury it and protect it until the right time." FT

Stephanie Findlay is the FT's Asia companies and markets editor

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A HORSE WALKS INTO A LAB

Polo's great leap beyond cloning. By Samantha Weinberg.
Photography by Violeta Capasso

IT'S A DECEMBER AFTERNOON AT THE CAMPO ARGENTINO DE POLO IN PALERMO, IN THE NORTHERN SUBURBS OF BUENOS AIRES.

The sun is shining in a sky of clear Argentine blue. The jacaranda trees are in bloom. You're sitting high in the stands overlooking an immaculate green lawn six times the size of a football pitch. A military band, with brass trumpets and drums, red epaulettes and shiny black jackboots, has just marched away. Argentina's president Javier Milei, famous for his Elvis sideburns and economic chainsaw, has taken his seat above the centre line.

Eight players canter on to the pitch, tanned arms, taut muscles, hair curling over the collars of their polo shirts. It's the first semi-final of the Argentine Open, the most prestigious tournament in the polo world, the one the players really want to win. This year the stakes are higher than usual. It may be the last open for Adolfo Cambiaso, the world's number-one player for more than two decades and the sport's greatest of all time.

Cambiaso has changed the way polo works. Not only through his skill and tactical genius, but as a result of a bet he made nearly 20 years ago. Cambiaso bought into the idea of cloning ponies a decade before his rivals. This year, many of the ponies he will ride in the open will be clones, identical twins of his favourite horses from years gone by.

The players line up, four against four, the ponies waiting, ears pricked, poised for action. The whistle blows, the game begins. The players streak up the pitch, sticks swinging, using their ponies to "ride off" their opponents, to block them from getting to the ball. They gallop, stop, turn on a sixpence and start speeding in the opposite direction. They bounce the ball on the small head of the stick, hit backhands under the ponies' necks. If there's a break, they gallop to one end and leap on to a fresh pony before charging back into the fray.

You can tell, sitting high in the stands, that the ponies get the game. They can anticipate what's going to happen. They're enjoying themselves. That in itself is remarkable. In the millennia since humans thought to tame the wild horses that roamed the steppes and plains, we have bent them to our will. For our species, horses have charged into battle, dragged ploughs through rocky fields and carriages through the slop of medieval cities. Now, man has taught them that a hard white ball needs to get to the end of a large field and through the gap between two poles.

In return, we feed them, tend to their shoes and teeth. We give them massages and march them up and down hills to make sure they are fit enough to play. We polish their coats, plait their tails and bandage their legs. And, to the best, we give another chance at life, through cloning. And another. And another.

But it seems that isn't enough. Now two men, a scientist and an entrepreneur, are going beyond making copies of an original. They are engineering polo ponies to make them even faster, in the hope that, in a game of high stakes and slim margins, it will give them the edge to win.

FOR ONE PONY, POLO PUREZA, THE CIRCLE OF LIFE BEGAN ON an estancia near the town of Coronel Suárez, a six-and-a-half-hour drive south-west of Buenos Aires. She was born on December 12 1988, a slight mare, raised on a diet of weeping lovegrass, the silvery fronds that grow in the red soil of the Pampas. It was apparent from an early age that she had what it took to make a great polo pony. She played in her first open final, aged only five, ridden by Pepe Heguy, one of four brothers who competed at the highest level.

Polo remains a macho sport. The top players are male, though there is an open tournament for women too. The grooms who canter the spare ponies up the side of the pitch wearing the gaucho's traditional floppy beret, the *boina*, are typically male. The open has only ever had male umpires. But the ponies are usually female. The players favour mares, citing their intelligence and grit.

Polo Pureza was one of the great polo mares of her generation. She was a bright bay, the colour of autumn conkers, with black legs, a white star between her eyes and another splash of white on her nose. She played at the top level for 14 years, winning the cup for best pony at the open, among many other awards.

"[That mare] was a natural polo player… One in a million," Heguy said, in a video made to celebrate Polo Pureza's induction into the polo pony hall of fame. "She had an impressive heart also. She was a mare who never got tired."

PREVIOUS AND NEXT PAGES: GENE-EDITED CLONES OF POLO PUREZA, PHOTOGRAPHED AT DOÑA SOFÍA STUD FARM

Polo Pureza retired in 2004. Before she died, samples of her DNA were banked in liquid nitrogen in the laboratories at Kheiron, a biotechnology company co-founded by Gabriel Vichera and based in a science park in the town of Pilar, 35 miles north-west of Palermo's polo fields.

With his neatly trimmed beard and white lab coat, Vichera, 46, would not be mistaken for a polo player. When I first emailed him, he apologised for not responding sooner: he was competing in the world indoor archery championships. It made sense: his company is named after Chiron, the mythical archer, half-man, half-horse.

It's the morning of the open semi-final and we're sitting around a large table in the cool of the conference room at Kheiron, just a few metres away from the vats of nitrogen housing Polo Pureza's remaining cells. There are photographs of horses on the walls. Each is a clone Vichera was responsible for creating, each a genetic replica of a famous polo pony. One photograph, the newest, is of five bright bay foals, covered in baby fluff, their legs still too long for their bodies. "These are the gene-edited Polo Purezas," he says. "The ones you are going to meet."

I stare at their photos. There is no clue in their faces of their unusual conception, no way to differentiate them apart from their similarities to each other and to the videos of Polo Pureza that I have watched.

Vichera started working out how to clone horses in 2010. Out of university, he wanted to build on the research into cloning that he'd done for his PhD. "There were two factors that made me start Kheiron," he says. "Firstly, polo is an important sport here. The genetics of the horses are taken very seriously, and good horses are sold for very high prices." The second was that, by 2010, Cambiaso had already waded into cloning.

He was the greatest of all time by then, winning more open finals than he lost. Every spring, Cambiaso earned millions of dollars playing for rich patrons in Palm Beach. He earned millions more on the hallowed lawns of Windsor and Cowdray each summer. In November that year, a six-month-old clone of his best mare, Cuartetera, reportedly sold at auction for $800,000. Vichera sensed an opportunity.

Cloning, from the Greek *klōn*, meaning twig, took root in the scientific community in 1958 when British botanist Frederick Campion Steward, based at Cornell University, succeeded in growing a whole carrot from a single carrot-root cell. Four years later, in a laboratory in Oxford, John Gurdon did the same with a frog.

To most, the age of cloning dawned with the birth of Dolly the sheep in 1996. Ian Wilmut and his colleagues at the Roslin Institute near Edinburgh had been looking at ways to develop animals that could produce medicine for human use. Creating a clone was something of a sideline. It took years and 276 failed attempts before they hit on the exact set of conditions that enabled Dolly's birth. She became a worldwide celebrity, an object of wonder and fear, before dying early of causes unrelated to her cloning.

Every species requires precise conditions to make cloning possible. But the basic technique is the same: take an egg, an oocyte, and empty it – a process known as enucleation. Gather some cellular material from the creature you want to clone – a scraping of skin will do – isolate a single cell and insert it into the emptied egg. Fuse them together using an electric pulse, wait about 90 minutes for them to get acquainted, reprogrammed, then chemically activate the egg to make it believe it's been fertilised. The successful pairing, the zygote, is then incubated until it's grown big enough either to be transferred into a surrogate mother, or frozen for later.

A Texas-based company pioneered the business of animal cloning around 2002. The small-pets side of the business took off. Barbra Streisand had two clones made of her beloved Coton de Tulear dog, Samantha. Each cost a reported $50,000. In 2018, Milei reportedly had five clones made of his mastiff, Conan, and named four of them after free-market economists: Milton, Murray, Robert and Lucas.

But horse cloning never achieved the volume required to become profitable in the US. It was expensive and hampered by regulation, particularly around the sourcing of eggs. Cambiaso and a business partner leased the technology to start their own horse-cloning concern in Texas, but the partnership descended into an acrimonious legal battle.

In polo, the agility, speed and temperament of the ponies is at least as important as the skill and power of their riders. But there's an extra, immeasurable dimension to polo: the relationship that's built between man and horse, how they understand and trust one another. It was this Cambiaso sought to reproduce with cloning.

Although the business model didn't work yet, Cambiaso had managed to create a demand for cloned polo ponies. No one was cloning in Argentina, and Vichera was confident that he could devise his own precise set of conditions to make it work. He approached a businessman named Daniel Sammartino and persuaded him to invest in Kheiron. Crucially, they found a ready supply of cheap oocytes from mares taken to the abattoir for slaughter.

Kheiron's first clone was born in 2013. "At first we used cells taken from the skin of the donor," Vichera explains. "But about half of the horses that were born using that technology had some kind of problem. So we decided to try to improve the process, using stem cells taken from bone marrow. It led to very good results: more birth-to-term horses with far fewer issues."

It changed the business model too. "In the first years of Kheiron, we generated a handful of clones. After we started using stem cells, we could generate hundreds each year." Cambiaso became a Kheiron client. For a match, each player brings a team of ponies and hops between them throughout the eight chukkas, or periods. During the 2016 final, Cambiaso won riding six Cuartetera clones. In 2025, Kheiron generated 400 foals, including 14 Cuarteteras.

AROUND THE SAME TIME AS THE FIRST KHEIRON CLONES were conceived, a new tool began revolutionising biotechnology. Scientists, led by Jennifer Doudna at University of California, Berkeley, and Emmanuelle Charpentier at Umeå University in Sweden, worked out how to use an enzyme, Cas9, to target a precise sequence of DNA and cut and paste it into living cells. It became known as Crispr-Cas9, and earned Doudna and Charpentier the 2020 Nobel Prize for Chemistry.

Crispr-Cas9 opened up a new world of edited genomes. It could be used to excise the genes that cause inherited diseases, such as sickle cell anaemia or Huntington's. Crops

WE POLISH THEIR COATS, PLAIT THEIR TAILS AND BANDAGE THEIR LEGS. AND, TO THE BEST, WE GIVE ANOTHER CHANCE AT LIFE, THROUGH CLONING

could become resistant to disease. Cattle or pigs could produce more milk or meat, and withstand hotter climates. Theoretically, human embryos could be edited to be taller, stronger, have blue eyes and blond hair.

For Vichera, the discovery of Crispr-Cas9 gave him an idea for Kheiron's next frontier: gene-edited polo ponies. He started hunting around the equine genome, focusing on the myostatin gene. This regulates muscle growth, preventing animals from growing abnormally large.

The first idea was simply to "knock out" that gene, to switch it off. But there were ethical considerations: there was no such thing as a horse without a working myostatin gene and nobody knew the medical implications for the animal. There was also a chance that it wouldn't be accepted by the regulatory authorities in Argentina, and the resulting ponies wouldn't be able to be released into fields, or to breed – or to be sold abroad.

Since Dolly's inception, the idea of genetically modifying organisms had become a hot topic at the nexus of politics and farming. Countries treated it differently. While the EU didn't regard cloned animals as genetically modified organisms, it took a firm line, banning cloning in agriculture, as well as the import or sale of meat from cloned animals (though the ban doesn't apply to animals used in sport or leisure). The EU was concerned about animal welfare, about the traceability of meat made from clones and about safety down the line. America took a different route, embracing cloning: in 2002 the National Academy of Sciences decreed that cloned meat was safe to eat and, six years later, the Food and Drug Administration approved its sale. Today, food made from cloned animals, and the offspring of clones, is sold in the US (and, since the UK signed its post-Brexit agriculture trade deal with the US, theoretically in the UK too). Argentina, like its neighbour, Brazil, a major beef producer, similarly embraced cloning – in agriculture and on polo fields.

The soul-searching and grappling for regulatory responses to Crispr-Cas9 is still ongoing, particularly when it comes to humans. In most countries, it's allowed for scientific research, for some therapeutic or somatic use, but is strictly prohibited from being used in human "germ line" editing, where whatever editing changes that are made could be inherited by future generations.

Vichera went back to the drawing board, and discovered that some horses have a specific genetic variation, known as a short interspersed nuclear element, or SINE, alongside the myostatin gene, which flips the switch, freeing the muscles to grow. Some horses had two, others none. The horses with no SINEs were associated with endurance; they were stayers. The ones with two were sprinters. And those with one were intermediates, something in between.

This, he thought, was interesting. What if he could take a polo pony that was a natural stayer and insert two SINEs on the myostatin gene? Theoretically, it would keep the temperament and agility of the original, but allow the muscles to grow enough to increase its 0-60 speed. It counted as germ line editing, but critically, in Argentina, it would be authorised for release and reproduction by the regulatory authorities as it wouldn't be creating anything that didn't already exist in horses.

He stresses this point. "We are only doing something that is naturally present in horses. We are not making transgenic horses." These days there are plenty of transgenic animals – where one species has "foreign" genes introduced into its genome, sometimes from another species – in animal research laboratories around the world: fish, goats, cows and lots and lots of mice, some of which glow green after having jellyfish genes spliced in. But they remain shrouded in ethical fog and, in most cases, they are tightly regulated and not allowed into the general population.

What Kheiron proposed was subtler. Vichera and his team worked out how to seamlessly replace a single sequence of 200 base pairs in a genome with about 2.7 billion base pairs.

But first, they needed to find the right horse. It had to be exceptional, with no SINE insertions. He went fishing through the genomes of his clients' polo ponies and came across Polo Pureza, the bay mare with the big heart who never seemed to tire. She would be the perfect candidate on which to try out his new technology: to insert the two SINEs into her genome to create, in theory, a faster, more-powerful version of the original.

Daniel Sammartino was intrigued when Gabriel Vichera's proposal to start Kheiron came across his desk 15 years ago. An engineer with an MBA from Harvard, he'd retired early from running the engineering and construction division of a large Italian-Argentine conglomerate. "My Dad worked for the same corporation and he died young," he explains. "I didn't want the same to happen to me, so I decided to do my own stuff."

We drive through the white pillars marking the entrance to his stud farm, Doña Sofía, near the picture-perfect gaucho village of San Antonio de Areco, an hour north-west of Pilar. There are paddocks either side shaded by eucalyptus trees. I can see horses grazing in the distance, flicking their tails lazily against the flies. We draw up by a lovely building, bright white in the midday heat.

Sammartino leads the way into a large room. There's an oval table and squashy chairs facing an imposing fireplace. He points at the horse rugs hanging over the back of the sofa. "That one was for winning the most famous taming contest for polo ponies in Argentina," he says. "My horse trainer won it this year. And that one was for the Grand Champion of the Rural Exhibition of Palermo, for the best pony, which we won in 2022, with a clone."

Like Vichera, Sammartino was not from polo stock. But he was fascinated by the idea of cloning. "I am very much in favour of entrepreneurship and innovation. Even in my corporate years, I was always pushing for new projects, new investments, new developments. So I guess it's in my DNA. And no one else was cloning horses commercially. It was a gamble, really."

The first years were tough: lots of money going in, and only a handful of cloned foals coming out. "People didn't believe in it. Some were even against it, and the Breeders' Association was not ready to accept it immediately." The association is the governing body of polo pony breeders in Argentina. Sammartino claims its bylaws state that any biotechnology or any means to improve the game is allowed.

One by one, Sammartino surmounted the challenges. Cambiaso not only ordered new Cuarteteras each year, but also clones of his other favourites. He cloned Dolfina Toro, a rare gelding among his ponies, but kept the clones entire, as stallions, so resurrecting a bloodline. Crucially, they showed the breeders that not only were the clones winning machines, but if you bred from them, their offspring – the foals of clones – would win too. Today, all the top players have clones.

"We weren't doing anything that a breeding programme wouldn't do naturally, by crossing horses with one another. We were just getting there a lot faster," Sammartino says.

When the idea of taking it a step further and enhancing the pony clones through gene-editing came up in one of Kheiron's brainstorming sessions, Sammartino approached Alberto Pedro Heguy, who bred Polo Pureza, and who was the father of Pepe, who rode her. It was a canny move: Heguy was a founder of the powerful Breeders' Association, the body that would determine whether gene-edited ponies would be allowed to compete. Heguy agreed.

In the Kheiron laboratory at the end of 2023, technicians withdrew the vial containing Polo Pureza's cells from the vat of liquid nitrogen. They isolated single cells and, using Crispr-Cas9, cut the 200-base-pair sequence on the myostatin gene with no SINEs and pasted in the equivalent sequence with

two SINEs. The individual cells were introduced to the enucleated egg shells, bonded, reprogrammed, activated and then transferred into surrogates. Eleven months later, five Polo Pureza sprinter foals were born on Doña Sofía's stud farm. They were the first gene-edited horses in the world.

WE GET BACK IN THE CAR AND DRIVE ALONG A TRACK TO a field, hemmed by electric fencing. The head trainer, Gregorio Pereyra, wearing his navy boina, *bombachas* (gaucho riding trousers) tucked into stitched leather boots, and a belt fastened by an impressive gold belt buckle, is waiting with four yearling fillies. The fifth died of pneumonia, unrelated to her unusual genesis. The fillies have filled out a little and their whiskers have grown since the photograph that hangs on the wall at Kheiron was taken, but they are immediately recognisable as baby Polo Purezas. Up close, they are not quite identical. Each has slightly different white face markings, epigenetic expressions of their experiences in different mares.

In the field, the youngsters appear used to human interest. One enjoys a back scratch, another blows gently on my hand. I stroke her, wondering what she knows, whether she remembers playing polo at the open, where Polo Pureza ends and she begins.

Sammartino pats one of the ponies on the rump with fatherly pride. "What we see here is she's a little wider, maybe more powerful than the pure clones," he says, with what comes across as faith as much as confidence. These foals are being raised on a specially designed diet, not the weeping lovegrass that was the main fodder of the original Polo Pureza. They lose interest in us. One returns to grazing. Another trots across the field. Just foals doing foal things.

As we drive back to the gates, Sammartino reveals that a new batch of gene-edited foals, clones of Levicu, another hall of fame inductee, will be born in 2026. And although the Breeders' Association has yet to decide whether or not to allow them to play polo, that's years off anyway. He's confident that, as the authorities learn about the process, they will accept and allow it, as they did cloning.

That's where his money is going. In his laboratory at Kheiron, Vichera is back hunting through the genome, looking for more genes that could be edited to produce a superior animal. "The big bet is on the future of all these emerging technologies, which are increasingly interesting to breeders of different breeds around the world," Sammartino says. The payout may come if, in five years' time, we see Polo Purezas sprinting down the green lawn at the open, completing the circle of life.

DANIEL SAMMARTINO, INVESTOR

On the highway back to Palermo, I mull on the question of rights, the ponies' and ours. Is it right to tinker with nature, even if, as Vichera and Sammartino are at pains to stress, they're only giving it a helping hand?

From the ponies' point of view, it's too early to tell, but so far, so good: a year in, the young Polo Purezas are healthy and want for nothing. But they are the vanguard of experiments with a technology that has the power to change any living thing.

Jeantine Lunshof, resident philosopher and ethicist in the Church genetics lab at Harvard, isn't entirely satisfied with the for-profit motive of gene-editing animals, whether for sport or for human consumption. She finds it easier to swallow the idea of harnessing the process for therapeutic ends: to cure genetic diseases or protect against environmental harms. "You would have to differentiate between the motivations," she says.

The same applies to humans: scientists in her lab are looking into using Crispr-Cas9 to excise the genes that cause sickle cell anaemia, or progressive muscle diseases. But although the science is there now to tinker with a human embryo to, say, increase musculature to make a future Olympic swimmer, she doesn't see it happening. The timescale of waiting to find out whether it's worked is just too great.

"The idea of gene-edited horses is fascinating, but I don't really see the point in it. And, more importantly, I don't know how they will prove it." Charlie Hanbury is a British polo player and a top breeder. Lovelocks Drogba, a pony he bred, won the Lady Susan Townley Cup for best playing pony at the last two opens. "I believe one of the reasons Polo Pureza was so good was because Pepe Heguy was so clever at reading the game. He used to beat players using his brain."

Hanbury has about 20 clones, also generated by Kheiron, grazing alongside his traditionally bred horses on his stud farms in the English countryside and Argentina. "I've followed the fashion a bit." But, he says, he uses them primarily for breeding, to enable him to continue the bloodlines of his favourite mares and stallions. "In my opinion, cloning hasn't created better horses. It's just created more copies of proven horses."

Even those, he says, aren't necessarily as good as the originals. Cambiaso "is probably the only person in the world who's been able to show the success rate of the clones in the sense that he's done it: they've played, they've won the open, they've won prizes just like the original. That's huge, but I personally believe you could give Adolfo a bicycle, and he would make it look like a motorbike."

He describes how the rules of the modern game have changed to make polo more exciting for spectators. "They're trying to blow less fouls to keep the game flowing more," Hanbury explains. "And now, when the ball goes out, you've got eight seconds and it's a drop ball and you have to keep running. So your horses are constantly playing at top speed."

This explains the impetus to create super ponies. "But I don't know to what extent the sprinter gene is actually useful in polo. No one does, yet. You might find that they go so fast they can't stop," Hanbury continues. Out of curiosity, he had the genomes sequenced of all his mares and foals, and discovered that most were intermediates, with the single SINE. None were sprinters.

"I think every horse you buy, or breed, it's a dream, isn't it? We all hope that that dream will make it to the top. Realistically, at least 95 per cent of them don't. But you still go back and buy or breed another dream and it's, you know, that horse is the one that will make it."

YOU'RE BACK IN THE HIGH STANDS IN PALERMO. THE SUN is sinking behind the new apartment buildings that line the western end of the campo, sliding a shadow across the grass.

The match, though, is heating up. It's end-to-end, gallop, stop, pirouette, gallop again. In the seats on the far side of the pitch, supporters of United Arab Emirates Polo, the underdogs, have started a rhythmic drumming. There are whistles, cheers, collective intakes of breath. It's hard to keep up with the scores and which ponies are on the field. The riders leap from one to another, keeping them fresh, keeping that explosive speed. Some names are familiar: Cuartetera clones 3, 6 and 9; the Hanbury-bred Lovelocks Drogba and Lovelocks Ba-Ba-Ba.

The scores tick up: 3-1 to La Natividad-La Dolfina (LN-LD), Cambiaso's team, then 7-3. At halftime it's 8-6. But as the game goes on, UAE continues to hang in there: 7-8, 9-10, 11-12.

At the start of the eighth and final period of play, known as a chukka, the score is 13-all. UAE pulls ahead, 14-13. Cambiaso leaps on to Grumpy, another of his favourite ponies. His nephew, Barto Castagnola, changes on to Drogba. The speed notches up a level. In the dying minutes of the match, LN-LD draws equal then pulls ahead. The whistle blows. Cambiaso's team wins, 16-14.

In the final, they face Ellerstina, whose players include Antonio Heguy, Pepe's son, who has won four opens riding Polo Pureza. In four or five years, maybe he will be riding one of the foals from Doña Sofía. And maybe she will be faster and more explosive than the original.

'WE ARE ONLY DOING SOMETHING THAT IS NATURALLY PRESENT IN HORSES. WE ARE NOT MAKING TRANSGENIC HORSES'

GABRIEL VICHERA
CO-FOUNDER, KHEIRON BIOTECH

The man who saw too much

After relocating to the Caribbean to make romcoms, film producer Philippe Martinez found himself in a far more sinister drama. A financing deal tied to the islands' 'golden passport' trade has led him to allege corruption, secret payments and geopolitical intrigue stretching from Beijing to Washington

By Cynthia O'Murchu
Portrait by Wulf Bradley

As his crew scrambled over finishing touches, Philippe Martinez sat down and readied himself. This was not the then 56-year-old Frenchman's usual position on set. Martinez had preferred to stay behind the scenes as a producer-director during his three decades in the movie business. Now, his imposingly wide frame illuminated by low-key lighting, he turned to camera and began:

"Every politician in the Caribbean is putting their head in the sand and avoiding talking about what is by far the biggest financial scandal that the Caribbean has ever faced." Though clearly compelled by a sense of urgency, Martinez spoke slowly in a heavy French accent. "And it's me, the guy that they tried to point [to] as a fraudster that brought all the evidence of this crime, this financial crime, that has defrauded the people of St Kitts & Nevis… and the people of St Lucia."

It was late 2024 and, for the past 18 months, Martinez had been digging into the so-called golden passport programmes of Caribbean islands, which allow investors to contribute financially to a country's economy in return for citizenship. They also allow companies that invest in construction and other projects to effectively become "wholesalers" of citizenships. Martinez's film production company had become one such investor. But he felt he'd been swindled, so he had launched a sweeping investigation into the scheme.

His research had come to include secret recordings with government officials and thousands of pages of documentation. It had been guided by advice from security experts and led to international court cases, yielding records of seemingly suspicious financial activity. The information Martinez amassed convinced him that he had not just found evidence of corruption or mismanagement. He believed he had uncovered a Chinese influence campaign that posed a potential national security risk to the US and the EU.

Martinez's opponents dismissed his accusations as little more than a "draft screenplay for a B movie" claiming he had simply miscalculated the market. But he disagreed. It was as if he had stepped into a real-life thriller. And he was ready to tell it all.

PHILIPPE MARTINEZ STEPPED OUT OF a limousine amid pulsing flash photography. It was 1991, and he was in his early twenties. The paparazzi weren't there for him. They'd come to capture the Hollywood royalty assembling at The Beverly Hilton to honour Giancarlo Parretti, who had recently bought MGM Studios. Like Parretti, a former waiter-turned-financier, Martinez came from humble origins in his native France. The son of a policeman, he had attended acting school and gone on to manage a playhouse in the southern city of Marseille, before moving to California.

A chance encounter at a French café on Sunset Boulevard brought Martinez into the network of one of Hollywood's most powerful agents, Jack Gilardi, who had represented the likes of Charlton Heston and Shirley MacLaine. With the confidence of a hustler, the young man introduced himself to the powerbroker as a producer. "The definition of a producer," Martinez later told me, "is someone that can create something huge out of nothing."

At the time of the gala, Martinez told me, he was on a mission to raise money for a movie project with two of Hollywood's hottest stars at the time, Don Johnson and his wife Melanie Griffith. Through Gilardi, Martinez had found himself listening to Johnson and Griffith's table-read of a script for *The Friendly*, a movie the couple wanted to co-produce. Though Johnson was at the apex of his stardom, raising money was never easy. Maybe, Martinez had offered, his contacts in France could help drum up some funding.

The gala was a moment of truth for Martinez. He had brought along a French businessman who he thought could be persuaded to invest – if only he could convince him that his connections were real. By the end of the evening, Martinez had proved his celebrity relationships were not just the fantasy of a youngster trying to blag his way into the American film industry. The investor was in.

His research

Like most Hollywood dreams, *The Friendly* never made it to theatres. But, over the next few years, Martinez set up his own company and struck deals to distribute American movies internationally. Then, in February 1999, US immigration officers swooped on Martinez's house and arrested him. Not only had the Frenchman overstayed his visa, but he was sought for extradition to France, where authorities had issued a warrant for his arrest following an allegation that he'd unlawfully solicited investments.

Martinez spent 14 months in Mira Loma, an overcrowded immigration detention centre located on the western edge of the Mojave desert, intent on fighting his extradition. He passed his nights in a bunk bed pondering his fate and his days hogging the payphone, attempting to stay in the film game. He persuaded fellow inmates to trade their phone time and coins in exchange for instant soups he procured from the commissary.

When it came to his legal troubles, Martinez denied wrongdoing and claimed he was a victim of manipulation. He argued that his only mistakes were naivety and relying on the advice of powerful lawyers who had guided his company. Martinez, who was eventually deported back to France, was found guilty of fraud and "irregular canvassing on behalf of a financial institution", according to court records. He was ordered to pay thousands of euros in restitution and served a short prison term.

IN EARLY 2022, MARTINEZ SAT DOWN ACROSS FROM Les Khan, a former banker who was the head of St Kitts' citizenship by investment programme, colloquially known as CBI. The veteran producer sensed he was about to be presented with a win-win opportunity.

Martinez's prison days were a distant memory. In the two decades since then, he had made a fresh start in Hollywood, working with big names from Dennis Hopper to Andy Garcia. He'd also branched out into writing and directing. Martinez had his ups and downs, overseeing a series of flops and getting into occasional legal spats and commercial disputes. But he managed to pull through, relying on his ability to line up tricky financing, including chasing tax incentives to help offset production costs. The flexibility of a creative mind didn't hurt. When previous funding fell through for *Viktor*, a 2014 revenge thriller originally set in the tropics, Martinez swiftly rewrote the script, so it could be set in Moscow and shot in Chechnya. Soon, he was shepherding French actor Gérard Depardieu and former *Austin Powers* star Elizabeth Hurley around Grozny.

In 2021, Martinez and his wife relocated to the island of Nevis, a 36-square-mile speck of land which, together with St Kitts, forms the federation of St Kitts & Nevis. He'd focused on making films, some starring Hurley, that benefited from financial incentives provided by Caribbean locations. Now, Khan was explaining in a gentle lilt how Martinez's production company, MSR Media, could become an official investor in the citizenship by investment programme.

St Kitts & Nevis had pioneered the industry, launching the world's first CBI programme in 1984 as a way to diversify its economy. In return for an investment in the low hundreds of thousands of dollars, wealthy individuals could acquire citizenship of the tiny island nation without having to turn up in person. For an additional fee, they could also get passports for their family members. Some would-be citizens simply bought a property while others made a financial contribution to a charitable foundation supporting economic diversification.

The country's dulcet climate and lack of income or wealth taxes wasn't the only lure. The St Kitts & Nevis passport allowed citizens visa-free access to more than 150 nations across the world. That was especially valuable for businesspeople from countries whose citizens may need to wait for weeks to get a travel visa to, say, the EU or the UK.

Over the years, other countries established similar schemes, including the Caribbean islands of Dominica, Grenada, Antigua and St Lucia. For St Kitts, the programme became a critical economic lifeline. By the time Khan and Martinez spoke, income from the citizenship by investment programme directly contributed nearly 60 per cent of St Kitts & Nevis's yearly revenue, according to the country's prime minister, and had helped finance projects ranging from luxury hotels to new roads. But there was a less publicised side. The EU, the US and international crime-fighting bodies had long warned that "golden passport" programmes across the world could be exploited.

Such worries were not on Martinez's mind, however. He was impressed by Khan's pitch. His company MSR would be allocated citizenship-by-investment shares for each film it committed to produce. Wealthy individuals would in turn invest in the films by purchasing the shares, each one qualifying as an investment to allow them to apply for citizenship for a family of four.

Martinez saw in Khan's proposal a way to keep making movies on the islands. After Covid-19 decimated tourism, St Kitts's leaders had pinned their hopes on establishing a globally relevant film industry. In 2021, MSR had struck a three-picture deal with Mark Brantley, Nevis's premier, who had thrown in a sweetener by offering to cover the cost of film-crew accommodation, up to $150,000 per movie. "This is an example of taking and making something from nothing," Brantley said after announcing the deal with Martinez.

By the time of Martinez's meeting with Khan, he'd already filmed several movies in quick succession. He was hailed for creating jobs and opportunities for locals, and Martinez even planned to set up a film studio on the island. But none of the pictures MSR had made so far had been a hit. Participating in the CBI could be a game-changer.

came to include secret recordings and thousands of pages of documentation

In May 2022, Martinez's company was approved as a CBI investor, in a deal that awarded it 15 citizenship shares per movie in return for a commitment to produce 28 films over the following four years. At a minimum value of $200,000 per share, the proceeds promised to be significant.

BY THE SUMMER OF 2022, A HEATED election campaign on the island had generated allegations Martinez found troubling. One of the issues was the sitting administration's dealings with a Chinese-owned real-estate development company. Caribbean Galaxy had been granted some 5,000 citizenship shares, in return for the promise to build a new jail on the island. At the minimum investment amount set by law for a share, Caribbean Galaxy was sitting on shares worth nearly $1bn for a prison that was budgeted at less than $50mn. It also meant that the volume of shares could potentially translate into as many as 20,000 passports in a country with a population of around 50,000.

In the previous decade, the global trade in citizenships had become progressively commoditised. As more countries and companies reselling shares joined the market, prospective applicants were being offered discounts, rebates and financing options. While the price of CBI shares was technically guaranteed by law, when resold in the real world they might fetch a fraction of that.

Martinez worried he'd made a deal in which he couldn't compete. He claimed a high-level contact told him that officials were incentivised to look away from citizenship shares being sold under the mandated value.

Martinez decided to investigate. Over the course of several meetings in the summer of 2022, at times accompanied by his business partner, he spoke to Khan and others. Caribbean Galaxy had cornered the market, Martinez complained. Khan conceded he shared some of Martinez's overall concerns about CBI enriching officials and agents, according to a recording of the conversation reviewed by the Financial Times. Khan nonetheless defended the programme. The revenue from the government fees generated through these sales was sorely needed, he explained.

A lawyer for Caribbean Galaxy said that Khan and the company were restrained from commenting, because of an ongoing defamation claim against Martinez. They added the company "has not been involved in corrupt practices or any other allegation as disseminated by Mr Martinez".

Martinez's line of questioning at times surprised his business partner, such as when he asked about Khan's connection with Ying Jin, Caribbean Galaxy's chief executive. A stylish woman in her early forties, Jin was known to tour the island flanked by bodyguards, visiting building sites in the company of the country's political elite. When Martinez suggested she worked with the Chinese government, Khan demurred, but said he had considered the possibility. (Neither Caribbean Galaxy, Khan nor Jin work for or on behalf of the Chinese government, a lawyer for Caribbean Galaxy told the FT.)

Martinez left the meeting deflated. In later court filings, he would claim that he repeatedly offered to play the recording to the incoming administration of Terrance Drew, a medical doctor in his forties with an earnest demeanour who had been elected in August 2022. Officials, however, refused to listen to it, he says.

By the end of the year, Drew's administration ordered a review of the golden-passport industry on the island and began initiating major reforms. They would eventually include laws that would explicitly criminalise "underselling", introduce continuing due diligence and agreements with the other CBI countries to raise the minimum investment from applicants to $200,000 across the region to stem the price wars. Martinez says he was reassured by Drew's promises. Plus he decided he had too much money at stake, having financed his films upfront, including through loans. Martinez resolved to fully commit to St Kitts & Nevis.

On a Sunday in mid-December, MSR's newest film *Christmas in the Caribbean* premiered in Basseterre, the capital of St Kitts & Nevis. At the opening, Martinez, who wrote and directed the romantic comedy, posed in front of a step-and-repeat with the film's star, Hurley, and prime minister Drew. As he reiterated his support for Martinez, Drew said: "He has embarked, and he has delivered and continues to deliver." Everybody was beaming.

IN THE SPRING OF 2023, THE DREW administration readmitted MSR as an investor to a redesigned version of the CBI programme. As the months went by and his financial pressures grew, Martinez says he increasingly felt that his push for a full investigation into the CBI programme had fallen on deaf ears.

He had also started to worry about his personal safety and was concerned he might be being watched. Martinez hired a security consultant, Dino Buloha. At first, the producer wanted Buloha to draw up plans to secure his home and comings and goings. But soon the relationship grew to include his investigation into CBI.

Reviewing Martinez's materials, which included a photo showing that the Caribbean Galaxy CEO had attended the UN General Assembly alongside the new administration, Buloha fuelled the producer's growing concern that the golden passports issue wasn't merely marred by unfair competition.

Buloha advised Martinez that pursuing a US national security angle was likely to get more attention. But he warned it was risky: Martinez could lose everything. Eventually, Buloha arranged for the producer to meet with an agent from the US Department of Homeland Security to outline his concerns about how the issue could affect American national interests. Martinez would later describe the meeting, which he says took place in a Manhattan hotel in August 2023, as like playing "the lead role of a movie that I don't control the script". (The US Department of Homeland Security did not respond to a request for comment.)

Martinez and Buloha were not alone in their disquiet about China's influence in the Caribbean. Think-tanks, academics and officials in the US and elsewhere have repeatedly drawn attention to the region's importance to Beijing's geopolitical strategy. Over the past two decades, China has become a major source of foreign direct investment in the Caribbean.

China's investments are not just economically driven. It has acknowledged its activity in the region is partially motivated by seeking international support for its position on Taiwan. As a 2023 US Congressional research paper noted, one of Beijing's goals "appears to be to isolate Taiwan" by "incentivising" Caribbean countries to end diplomatic ties with the country. The only 12 governments worldwide that maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan include St Kitts & Nevis and St Lucia, each of which have a vote at the UN.

Meanwhile, Caribbean passports have been heavily marketed in China, finding a receptive audience with business owners and entrepreneurs. For a time, the lack of residence requirement and the speed at which citizenships could be granted were often highlighted features. Despite China's strict capital controls, Chinese investors made up the second biggest single group buying citizenships in the Caribbean as of 2024, according to statistics provided by Caribbean countries to the EU.

OVER THE NEXT TWO YEARS, MARtinez fully pivoted from movie producer to crusader. Investigating the citizenship programme became a frantic full-time occupation. He continued to collect recorded conversations and records, aired his claims in court, contacted US lawmakers and issued press releases publicising his allegations. To defend a defamation suit against him by the former prime minister of St Kitts & Nevis and Caribbean Galaxy, a US court granted MSR the right to subpoena banking records to trace his legal adversaries' finances. This trove yielded a series of suspicious payments, including from Caribbean Galaxy to a company registered to Khan while he was still head of St Kitts' CBI programme. A representative for the company said, given the ongoing defamation claim, Caribbean Galaxy and Khan could not provide specific comments about the payments. In court, Caribbean Galaxy denied providing any kickbacks to Khan.

All the while Martinez continued to cultivate an expanding network of informants, confidential sources and officials across the region. This included the island of St Lucia, to which Caribbean Galaxy had shifted its focus under the leadership of its new CEO: Les Khan.

An informant leaked Martinez a set of contracts between the government of St Lucia and Caribbean Galaxy to build a vast five-star luxury resort complex. Martinez published them, revealing that the company had been granted up to 5,000 extra citizenship shares for the resort – which, nearly eight years after the original contract was signed, remains unfinished – and a further 6,000 shares in return for investments in unspecified infrastructure projects. Together, the shares could have potentially yielded more than 40,000 new citizens. St Lucia's former opposition leader, drawing on some of Martinez's documents, subsequently asked a court to determine whether these and another contract were granted legally and whether any underselling had occurred. (A separate application for an injunction was unsuccessful.) St Lucia officials denied any wrongdoing had occurred and said they stood by the propriety of the country's citizenship by investment programme.

By April last year, Martinez's relationship with the island where he once dreamt of building a future had fallen apart entirely. The government of St Kitts & Nevis ended its investment agreement with MSR, alleging "multiple breaches" of contractual obligations including because the company hadn't delivered the films it had planned to produce. It also accused MSR of having launched a "co-ordinated international campaign" to discredit the CBI and "falsely accused" government officials of "unethical practice". Drew, meanwhile, publicly accused Martinez of being a fraudster, referencing his prior conviction.

ST KITTS & NEVIS IS APPROXIMATELY 2500 MILES FROM THE US MAINLAND

10KM
ST KITTS & NEVIS
North Atlantic Ocean
US
THE BAHAMAS
CUBA
HAITI
PUERTO RICO
JAMAICA
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
Caribbean Sea
BARBADOS
VENEZUELA
COLOMBIA
500KM

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I CAUGHT UP WITH MARTINEZ IN NOVEMBER. THE events of the past few years have clearly taken a toll. Still, he has not lost his zeal for his cause. Martinez's contacts with US law enforcement did not end with the Manhattan meeting with the Homeland Security agent. His allegations sparked a probe, according to four people who told the FT they had been in contact with American agents in relation to the probe.

Martinez registered as a whistleblower under the Department of Justice and FinCEN whistleblower programmes. Though he acknowledges the possibility that any probe may not result in action, Martinez found some of his concerns shared by one of his most ardent detractors. Addressing parliament in June 2024, Drew blamed the previous administration for bringing the country's CBI programme into disrepute. The decision to grant such a high volume of citizenships to Caribbean Galaxy's jail project was "a travesty" and "borderline treason". He went on to say that the prison project – which is still uncompleted – had contributed to more than 20,000 new citizenships being granted. Today, the total number of CBI citizens surpasses the native population of St Kitts.

In 2024, Martinez pressed ahead with a court action to compel the government to cancel citizenships granted to investors in Caribbean Galaxy's jail project. The case did not proceed to trial. However, he found himself vindicated when documents he had unearthed and presented in court ultimately led to a finding by the St Kitts government that citizenships had indeed been granted below the lawful investment amount.

As part of a judicial review in St Kitts, MSR entered into evidence a batch of more than 185 leaked citizenship applications linked to the jail project. After reviewing them, St Kitts announced it had blacklisted two agents and had found that scores of applicants had not made the legally required investment to be eligible for citizenship. The government stripped 13 people of their citizenships because they refused to pay the difference. In its press release, the government did not make any reference to the jail project and no findings were made public against Caribbean Galaxy.

A representative for the company said, given the ongoing defamation claim, Caribbean Galaxy and Khan could not provide specific comments. But they said the company "has always followed the law in regard to the sale of CBI shares and taken all market risk in the process in order to eliminate the risk to taxpayers and the government. All CBI passports were issued only after rigorous, third-party vetting authorised by the government."

In separate filings exhibited in US court, Caribbean Galaxy pleaded that all citizenship shares sold by it "were priced at fair value and in compliance with the legal requirements of the CBI". As of late last year, the government continued to process applications linked to the jail project, rechecking due diligence and asking investors to top up their investment to keep their citizenships, according to Prime Minister Drew.

In September, the governments of the Caribbean citizenship by investment countries announced they would introduce additional significant measures to improve CBI oversight amid pressure from the US and the EU. This would include a regional regulator, collection of biometric data for applicants and, in some countries for the first time, a brief residency requirement. The same month the new head of St Kitts' CBI office completed a five-day roadshow to court citizenship agents in China, while Drew posed for pictures with President Trump on the sidelines of the latest UN General Assembly in New York and reiterated his country's commitment to strengthening ties with the US.

Nonetheless, in January St Kitts was among the 75 countries, 10 of which operate CBI programmes, whose citizens' US immigrant visa applications were indefinitely suspended. Caribbean Galaxy and the former prime minister's defamation claims are due to be heard later this year.

Martinez remains unconvinced by the changes to the CBI programme. He intends to return to filmmaking. But "I cannot make movies about Christmas any more," he told me. "I don't see myself making a *Christmas in Paradise 2*, OK?" Instead, he intends to produce movies concerned with national security issues. "I'm an optimist. I want people to know the truth. I want to recover my money and that of the people of the Caribbean. You have to consider that this story is bigger than we think it is." **FT**

Cynthia O'Murchu is an FT investigative reporter

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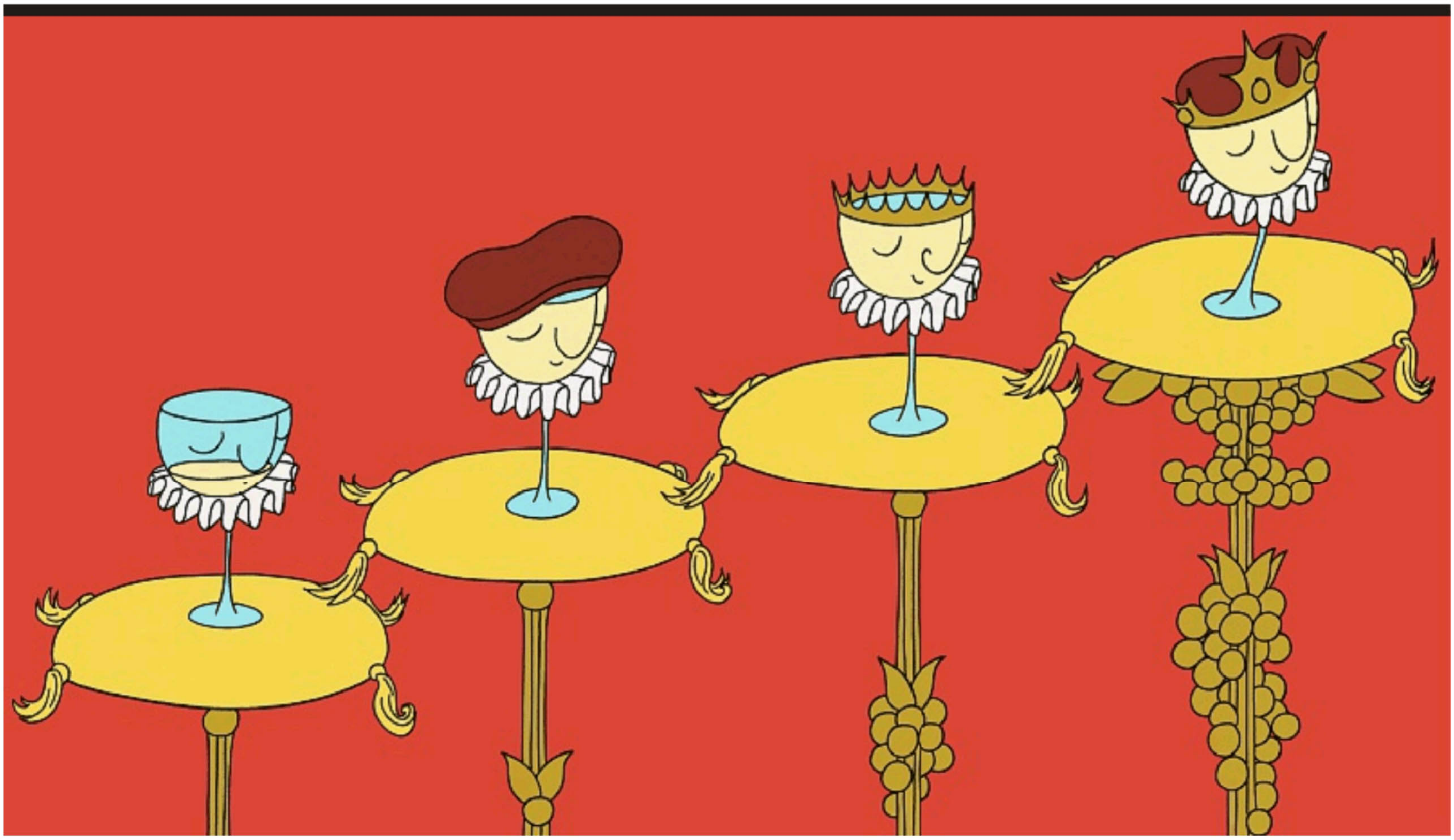

Wine

Spain in six glasses

by JANCIS ROBINSON

ILLUSTRATION *by* DEBORA SZPILMAN

In the little puddle of life that is the world of wine, there is fierce competition between trade fairs. Europe, the most important wine-producing continent, is the most obvious location. Vinexpo in Bordeaux once reigned supreme, then gave way to Prowein in Düsseldorf's extensive but unlovely showground. Taking place last week, Wine Paris is now snatching the international wine trade fair crown from Prowein, the City of Light having more obvious and varied attractions than Düsseldorf.

Barcelona Wine Week is cunningly timed for the week before Wine Paris so that intercontinental visitors can combine the two. I spent a long day there for the first time this year and met wine merchants, sommeliers and wine educators from the US and Colombia inter alia.

As with most trade fairs, there was an associated programme of presentations and wine tastings, which is why I was there. Our Barcelona-based Spanish specialist on JancisRobinson.com, Ferran Centelles, and I had been asked to host a tasting of six hand-picked wines to represent the glory of Spain – a tall order.

JANCIS RECOMMENDS

SPANISH SUPERSTARS

Below I give the wine we served followed, where judged possible, by a less expensive version of a similar wine.

- **Gramona, Celler Batlle 2015 Vino de España/Corpinnat (12%)**
  €67.60 VINOSONLINE.ES
  Gramona Innoble Cuvée 319 NV Vino de España/Corpinnat (12%)
  £38.50 THE WINE SOCIETY
- **Rafael Palacios, Sorte O Soro 2023 Val do Bibei, Valdeorras (14%)**
  £1,800 FOR SIX BOTTLES IN BOND FARR VINTNERS, VINQUINN
  Rafael Palacios, Louro do Bolo 2023 Valdeorras (14%)
  £24 LONDON END WINES
- **Verum, Las Tinadas Cuvée Especial CVC Vino de la Tierra de Castilla (12.3%)**
  €69.99 BODEGASVERUM.COM
  Verum, Las Tinadas Airén 2022 Vino de la Tierra de Castilla (11.5%)
  £27.50 THE GREAT WINE CO
- **Celler del Roure, Ferrero I Senis Laprebella 2024 Valencia (13%)**
  2023 IS £139 FOR SIX IN BOND VINQUINN
  Celler del Roure, Les Prunes, Les Filles d'Amàlia Rosado 2023 Valencia (12.5%)
  £70 FOR SIX IN BOND VINQUINN
- **Tempos Vega Sicilia, Único Gran Reserva 2016 Ribera del Duero (14.5%)**
  £279 IN BOND LAY & WHEELER
  Alión 2022 Ribera del Duero (14.5%)
  £60 IN BOND LAY & WHEELER
- **López de Haro, Clàssica Rosado Gran Reserva 2013 Rioja (13%)**
  £37 THE WINE SOCIETY

FOR TASTING NOTES, SCORES AND SUGGESTED DRINKING DATES SEE JANCISROBINSON.COM.
FOR INTERNATIONAL STOCKISTS SEE WINE-SEARCHER.COM

Ferran, known locally as Fredi, is a very special character. He is so popular in Spanish wine circles that it is almost impossible to make any progress through a wine-minded crowd with him, so many people want to salute him. I lost count of the number of people who came up to me at the fair prefacing their remarks, "I'm a friend of Fredi."

He started out in hospitality when he was 17, as a commis waiter at the seminal El Bulli restaurant on the Costa Brava run by the world-famous chef Ferran Adrià. On the day he turned 18, his mother called the restaurant and asked to speak to Ferran, "because she wanted to congratulate me and see how I was doing. Of course, the phone was passed to Adrià right in the middle of a very stressful service." From that day on, he was known as Fredi.

He rapidly worked his way up to becoming El Bulli's somm and stayed there until its closure in 2011. I remember well, on one of our visits there, his proposing a range of sherries to go with our (typically extraordinary) meal. His extreme charm and enthusiasm stood out even then. By 2006, when he was only 24, he was voted Spain's best sommelier in the Ruinart Challenge. Today, he is Adrià's wine man, writing enormous books with him and for the elBulli foundation, as well as teaching and presenting wine in an unusually creative way.

In hands as meticulous as Rafa's, Godello can rival white burgundy

His personal tasting before our joint one at the fair was an enquiry into so-called royal wines. He set out to demonstrate that, while there was no written evidence that Tokaj was, as legend has it, "the wine of kings and king of wines" in the French court, Spain could field many documented examples of wine appearing on royal tables such as Rueda, Cariñena and Alicante wines. To that end, he had ferreted around in many an archive, hired a well-known Catalan actor in full period costume to act out the part of King Philip II of Spain, and persuaded one of Barcelona's top sommeliers to dress up similarly and hand out sweetmeats with the king's portrait on them to every attendee.

OUR TASTING WAS A RATHER MORE CONVENTIONAL affair. Ferran/Fredi had combed through our database of nearly 14,000 Spanish tasting notes to identify the highest-scoring wines and came up with current versions of six tip-top representatives: a sparkling wine, two dry whites, an oak-aged rosado and two reds, including the latest vintage of Spain's most famous wine Vega Sicilia Único.

Tempos Vega Sicilia's CEO, Pablo Álvarez, was sitting in the front row, and two more of the producers featured were there too, which was a bit nerve-wracking. Would I get the percentage of new oak right? Ferran, bless him, had briefed me well beforehand.

The top wine of Gramona, Celler Batlle 2015, was a gem, made from the classic Spanish sparkling wine grapes Xarel-lo and Macabeo, grown biodynamically. The Gramona family were early exponents of holistic farming with sheep, hens and horses as common as vines. They're also distinguished

FIRST SIP

HOW DO YOU MAKE SPARKLING WINE?

The bubbles in wine are created by the carbon dioxide that's a routine byproduct of alcoholic fermentation. So the trick is to create a second alcoholic fermentation by introducing a mix of yeast, plus sugar for it to work on, to a still base wine and to keep the result under pressure so as to retain the dissolved carbon dioxide.

It is the contact between the wine and the dead yeast cells, or lees, that adds interest to the base wine. So, generally, the longer and closer that contact, the more complex the sparkling wine. A sparkling wine made in tank under pressure (the so-called tank or Charmat method) and kept there for a few months will be infinitely less interesting than a wine whose second fermentation took place in individual bottles (the traditional method) and was then kept in contact with the lees for years, in bottles laid on their sides and usually stoppered with a metal crown cap.

In both cases, unless the wine is to be sold as a fashionably cloudy "pet-nat", the sparkling wine is separated from the lees. In the tank method it's simply filtered under pressure. With individual bottles, it's a bit more fiddly and the process is called disgorgement. The bottles have to be gently upended so that the sediment gathers in the neck, a process called riddling and nowadays usually done in large, computer-controlled metal crates (first embraced in Catalonia, incidentally).

The necks of the bottles are then frozen so that the sediment shoots out in a neat pellet, the bottle is topped up, typically with a little sugar dissolved in wine called the dosage, and a champagne cork and muzzle applied – all under pressure.

by their classical way of making sparkling wine: the wine is aged on the lees of the second fermentation for a full nine years under natural cork instead of the much more common crown cap, and they riddle and disgorge the bottles by hand (see First Sip on the previous page).

Then there was Rafael Palacios's Valdeorras from his favourite vineyard O Soro and the "dream vintage" 2023, based on the local Godello grape. In hands as meticulous as Rafa's, it can produce wines every bit as refined and long-lasting as a serious white burgundy.

The third wine was one with which I feel a particular affinity because I came across it even before Ferran did. I've always been fascinated by boiling hot La Mancha in south-central Spain, Don Quixote country that has traditionally supplied some of the cheapest bulk wine and grape concentrate in the world. Elias López Montero was born into a family wine business there and contacted me in 2019, sending samples of some wines he made from particularly old vines. He then came to London to tell me all about them, and the unusual La Mancha wine business. His pride and joy is a fascinatingly complex, multi-vintage dry white made from the local Airén variety, but in this case vines exactly as old as I am (ancient) with their produce aged in his family's historic clay jars, once used for storing brandy. The particular wine we showed was a non-vintage blend made substantially of 2023 with a little oaked 2022 and 2021.

Oaked rosé is not a common style, but Rioja has a long tradition of making complex rosados aged for many years in the same old oak barrels as its famous reds, thereby qualifying as Gran Reservas. The easiest to find is the more expensive version from López de Heredia but Ferran chose an extremely well-priced 2013 from López de Haro, which proves that big companies can make fine wine too.

He suggested including a representative from a "new" Spanish wine region that he has been lauding on our site. Terres dels Alforins is not an official denomination but a group of villages in the hills behind Benidorm capable of making wines of unexpected delicacy. Our 2024 from Celler del Roure was also based on local grape varieties, supremely adapted to a hot, dry Mediterranean climate, the sort of vines the rest of the world increasingly needs.

And finally, Único 2016, the first, slightly subtler vintage for which the new winemaker Gonzalo Iturriaga was wholly responsible.

We could have chosen so many more wines: examples of transparent Garnacha, thrilling white Albillo and decades-old red rioja just for starters. But arguably the most glaring omission was sherry, Spain's unique gift to the world. FT

Review

The Porter's Table, Covent Garden

by JAY RAYNER

ILLUSTRATION *by* DANIEL EGNEUS

At the start of our dinner at The Porter's Table, one of two restaurants inside the new £73mn Guinness Open Gate Brewery in London's Covent Garden, a portion of soda bread is delivered to our table, as craggy and fractured as the sea cliffs of County Cork. It arrives on a Guinness-branded hunk of cast iron the size of a breeze block. On the top is a circular recess for the bread. That in turn is tucked into what looks like the domed lid of a chafing dish, except the dome is moulded into place and is just for show. In the side of the block is a drawer which pulls out to reveal – ta-da! – a slate bearing a scoop of butter dusted with "charcoal salt", as if iron filings are now a seasoning option. There is, of course, a Guinness-branded butter knife.

Each one of these monumental bread platforms must have cost an industrial shed load, although you wouldn't get much for it on *Flog It!* And each is a tribute to precision engineering. But in service of what? What's wrong with a plate? A Guinness-branded plate for the "Guinness soda bread" if you must, but just a plate rather than this lumbering brick which looks like an altar, minus the votive candles. It sums up the entire project. Service at The Porter's Table is as smooth as that canary-yellow butter. The modern grill-room menu is reasonably solid. But what exactly is it all for?

FIND IT

THE PORTER'S TABLE

28 Shelton Street, London WC2H 9JE
opengatelondon.guinness.com

Snacks £3-£18
Starters £12-£16
Mains £14-£35
Desserts £6-£10

Tonight, we're in the first-floor dining room because the extraction has stopped working downstairs, apparently. The white-tiled space looks like the restaurant of a hip hotel, which is merely trying on a concept for size. And if this one doesn't work, well, they'll have a crack at rotisserie chicken. But for now, we have soda bread and pickled onions, in some Diageo-funded, Disneyesque celebration of Covent Garden's history; a place once lousy with barrows pulled by porters whose only legacy is this restaurant as brand extension: welcome to Diageo-land, that special place for an awkward night out. You can take a tour of the downstairs brewery or get a pint. Off the courtyard entrance is "a merch-filled wonderland" – their words – where you can buy Guinness-branded umbrellas so, when it tips it down, you can do their advertising for them. Meanwhile up here that Guinness soda bread is joined by sauces made with Guinness and side dishes made with Guinness and desserts made with Guinness. Mine's only a half because, whisper it, I don't really like Guinness. Too much body. Not the way I want to get my calories. But I do like to show willing.

THE FOOD IS OVERSEEN BY PIP LACEY, who made her name at Hicce, a former restaurant in King's Cross focused around a wood-fired grill, curing and pickling, and, given the lumbering corporate weight of all this, she hasn't done a bad job. There's a nice enough roast chicken and a "butcher's skewer" that's meant to celebrate the "underrated cuts", but oddly tonight it's stuck with highly rated rib-eye, perhaps because there aren't many punters and they need to get through it. Green peppercorn sauce is fine but, happily, doesn't taste of the advertised Guinness. Fermented chilli brown butter is better. It has an emphatic kick, as does the side of burnt cabbage with a ferment of carrots and pickled chillies. There are diverting moments: a starter of roasted bone marrow, mixed with the armpit funk of Baron Bigod cheese, offset by pickled carrots, and a side of crisped, confit potatoes sandwiching mushrooms, apparently cooked in Guinness (natch). Thin, dull slices of rolled pork belly are, however, overwhelmed by a sauceless "no-waste piccalilli", which probably sounded better in the menu development meeting than it reads on the page.

The problem is that, for all the good things, no London dining room sits in isolation. The capital is full right now of restaurants offering similar fire-and-smoke menus. Over on the other side of Soho is The Devonshire, an annoyingly successful pub, which is annoying precisely because it's so good at what it does. Downstairs they serve thousands of pints of Guinness a day to people furiously determined to have a good time. Upstairs is a grill room, where they serve smoked salmon with soda bread, and a beef cheek and Guinness suet pudding, less because it's on brand, more because it makes total sense in their white-tableclothed dining room. Even though it's obviously the product of experienced hospitality veterans who thought long and hard about it all, The Devonshire feels organic and alive. (You can't buy a Devonshire-branded umbrella, although never say never). At The Porter's Table, you can see the workings in the margins.

We finish with a chilled blood-orange soufflé and squidgy miniature Guinness cakes with a cream-cheese frosting. I could imagine eating those again, though I still won't order a pint. I'm much happier with a glass of Albariño. Custom has been sparse tonight, and by 9.30pm the dining room is empty. That sums up the mood. There's a seafood restaurant called Gilroy's Loft up on the fifth floor, but I would be more likely to return for the food truck in the courtyard which is stacked with bronzed-and-pleated pastry wonders by pie-master Calum Franklin: chicken, tarragon and mushroom; spiced squash with Graceburn cheese and carlin peas; and, of course, braised beef and Guinness. Those look like they would keep you warm on a winter's night and make total sense here, in this manicured brewery yard. As ever, context really does matter, and here at the Guinness Open Gate Brewery the context is profoundly odd.

I'm off for a few weeks. In my absence, this column will be exploring restaurant eating opportunities further afield. I'll be back later next month. FT

jay.rayner@ft.com

PHOTOGRAPHY by ANDY SEWELL • STYLING by GEORGIA RUDD

Recipe Club

Spanish chicken, decheffed to impress

FT Weekend editor Janine Gibson once admitted that she spent much of the pandemic thinking not about absent family, friends or indeed colleagues, but a single dish: the arroz con pollo at abc cocina in New York. Chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten's dish is a brilliant version of a simple Spanish combination, elevated by its freshness (the citrus); fire (the jalapeños) and texture (that crispy chicken skin), not to mention some fairly cheffy technique. What follows is a home cook-friendly version of what they make in the restaurant, which now includes a London outpost, abc kitchens at The Emory hotel, whose head chef Ben Boeynaems provided this recipe. It is the perfect choice if you ever need to impress while also playing it fairly safe with ingredients. *Harriet Fitch Little*

DRINK
An aromatic white such as Blanc de Lynch-Bages 2022, a Bordeaux Blanc or Cervaro della Sala 2020.

SUBSTITUTIONS
If you are using dried shiitake mushrooms be sure to rehydrate them first. Another long-grain rice will work in the place of jasmine.

TIP
For maximum flavour, infuse the stock as they do at the restaurant. Bring to a boil in a pot then add a stick of kombu, a few rosemary sprigs and 1½ teaspoons of sea salt. Remove from the heat and let stand for 10 minutes before discarding the solid ingredients. (If you do this step, don't add the salt in step five.)

ABC KITCHENS' CHICKEN AND RICE

TO SERVE FOUR

For the soffritto
- 3 cloves garlic
- 1 tbs Malden sea salt
- 35g fresh jalapeños, roughly chopped
- 45g fresh shiitake mushrooms, stemmed and roughly chopped
- 400g white onion, small diced
- 2 sprigs rosemary, minced
- 1 tbs water
- 1 tbs extra virgin olive oil

For the chicken
- 800g skin-on boneless chicken, ideally a mix of breast and thigh
- 3 tbs plain flour
- 1 tbs neutral oil
- 360g jasmine rice
- 800ml rich chicken stock
- 1½ tsp sea salt
- Zest of 1 lemon
- A lemon and hot sauce and to serve

1. Combine garlic and salt in a pestle and mortar and process to a paste, then add to a food processor with the jalapeños and mushrooms and pulse to medium texture.
2. Add the mix to a pan with the onion, rosemary, water and oil. Cook over a low heat with a lid on until the ingredients have released their liquid, then continue to cook uncovered until everything is very soft and reduced. This might take up to half an hour.
3. Preheat the oven to 190C. Meanwhile, use a sharp knife to remove the skin from the chicken. Cut away any remaining fat from the skin and discard, then arrange the skin on a tray lined with parchment paper. Sprinkle with some salt then bake until dry and lightly golden – about 10 minutes.
4. Cut the chicken into bite-sized pieces then coat in the flour. Place the chicken in a pan and sauté the pieces in the oil until golden.
5. Add the pre-cooked soffritto to an ovenproof pan. Add the rice and stir to coat well, then add exactly 800ml of stock and the sea salt and bring it up to a simmer.
6. Add the chicken, cover the pan with a lid or foil and cook in the oven at 200C for 15 minutes.
7. Remove the pan from the oven and let it stand for five minutes before fluffing the dish with a fork and spooning into a hot bowl.
8. Finish with black pepper, the lemon zest and shards of crispy chicken skin and serve with a lemon wedge and hot sauce on the side.

NEXT WEEK – A UKRAINIAN RAINY DAY SOUP

FT LIVE

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LONDON'S MOST BEAUTIFUL DISHES

***by* NIL MUTLUER**

SWANKY

HIERARCHY OF PLEASURES

SIMPLE

Cycene, Shoreditch
Cycene, the Michelin-star restaurant at Blue Mountain School, feels as carefully curated as the space's retail and art offerings. Every detail, from broth pots to silverware, is chosen with intention. The nine-course tasting menu moves from foraged canapés to masterfully composed plates, with head chef Taz Sarhane and his team guiding you through each dish. Worth every penny.

Sollip, Southwark
One of my favourite places. Woongchul Park and Bomee Ki's Michelin-star cooking makes you feel truly cared for. Their refined blend of Korean and European techniques, ingredients and flavours comes through in everything, from the nourishing, beautiful food and artful plating to the tableware. Make sure to finish your meal with tea so you can enjoy the gorgeous teaware.

The Silver Birch, Chiswick
Modern British fare with a twist, thanks to the sleek, playful plating. Head chef Nathan Cornwell uses produce sparingly to add delicate, toylike details to the dishes, making the whole experience feel thoughtful and fun. If they're serving Devon crab and caviar, you're in for a treat. Presented in a perfect little tin, it feels like opening an edible jewellery box.

Tiella Trattoria, Bethnal Green
Dara Klein's Italian eatery brings the ease and warmth of a nonna's dining table to Columbia Road. The cooking is generous and full of love, and it shows on the plate. Served in rustic trattoria-style interiors set within a former pub, it's comforting and joyous without trying too hard.

Elm London at The Montpelier, Peckham Rye
The Montpelier has had some great guest chefs, and Michael Bagnall is no exception. His residency is proof pub food can be beautiful: the dishes are simple but elegant, full of character and bright flavours. Plus, everything is presented in an unfussy but stylish way.

As told to Megan Hill. Nil Mutluer is a culinary artist and chef de partie at Sessions Art Club

INSIDER'S NOTEBOOK

End of the road for Italian digestivo?

by SOPHIE RENHULDT

ILLUSTRATION *by* ALICE PIAGGIO

ITALY MAY NOT HAVE MASTERED THE ART OF forming a queue or sticking to train schedules, but some rituals are adhered to strictly. For example: a meal is not complete until its various courses and their corresponding drinks have been served in the correct order. The *digestivo* signals the end. At restaurants, the waiter leaves a bottle of limoncello, grappa or sweet wine on your table along with an unspoken invitation: *drink as much as you like and when you're ready, I'll bring the bill.*

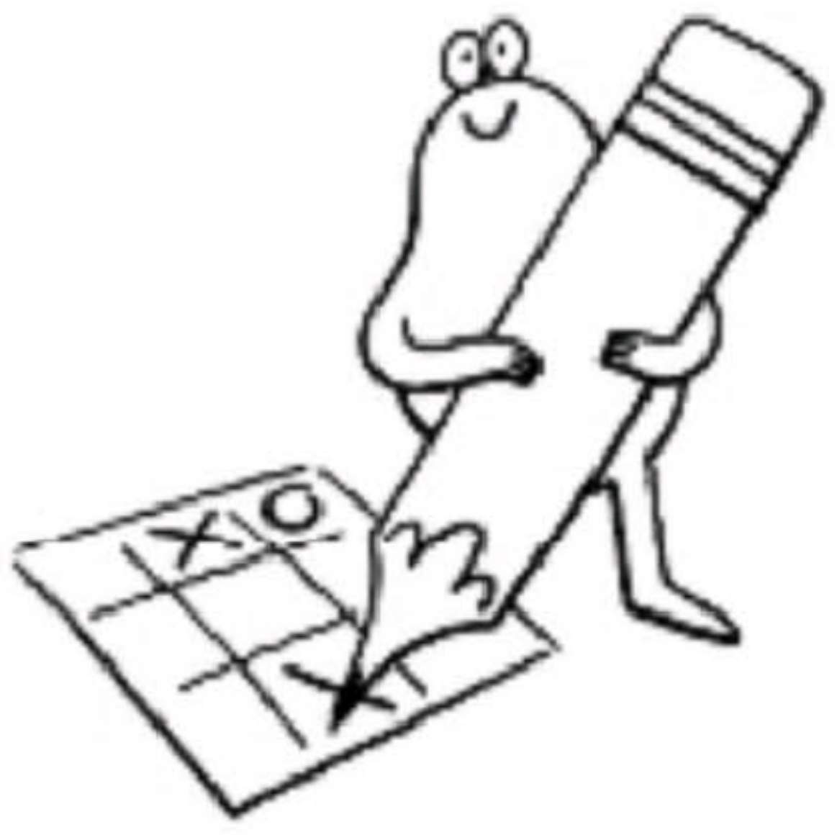
For the past year, though, the limoncello increasingly sits untouched, if presented at all. In late 2024, Italy introduced significantly stricter enforcement of its blood alcohol limit for driving (at 0.5g/L it is lower than in England, where it is 0.8g/L). In my city, Trieste, roadside checks, once sporadic outside holidays, now happen on ordinary weeknights – part of a crackdown that includes fines of up to €6,000, jail time and long licence suspensions. "In the beginning, everyone panicked," says a chef who runs a Michelin-starred restaurant on Lake Garda. "Especially those with more to lose: lawyers, doctors, executives. They think their name will end up in the paper." His restaurant has seen a steady decline in dessert wine and *digestivi* sales for years, but the crackdown has accelerated it. Now guests often skip the nightcap, opting instead for wines by the glass earlier in the meal.

I often use the Fuoricasello guide when travelling for work – a directory of traditional, family-owned osterie within 10 minutes of motorway exits. A 1950s trattoria near Bologna, a personal favourite, used to go through four bottles of *digestivi* per week. Now they barely finish one. "At a table of four, three drink and one suffers," the waiter says, describing what he calls "very obvious designated drivers". Coffee has taken the place of amaro.

Halfway between Trieste and Gorizia, an osteria sommelier tells me that the question of who gets to drink the *digestivo* has become an act of love. "Couples each used to have two. Now you'll see one person drinking a grappa, the other watching, ready to drive home." The restaurant has scrapped its *digestivo* and sweet wine pairings from the tasting menu and replaced them with aperitivo and sparkling options before dinner. The body metabolises roughly one unit per hour, so swapping a 40 per cent grappa at the end of the meal for a 12 per cent sparkling at the start makes a rough sort of sense.

Some restaurants are leaning into this early-drinking shift. A fine-dining restaurant close to the Slovenian border has revived a tradition: pairing the starter with Ramandolo, a local sweet wine. "A hundred years ago, starting a meal with sweet wine was customary," the sommelier explains. "It's our responsibility to find new spaces for these products."

Even in Italy, traditions can be reinvented according to the times. As to whether drivers might one day come to accept that the safest amount to drink is nothing? *Piano piano*, as they say. FT



GAMES

MINI CROSSWORD

NO 97 SET BY SLEUTH

8 clues:
2 straightforward
2 general knowledge
2 cryptic
2 anagrams

1		2		3		4
	■		■		■	
5						
	■		■		■	
6						
	■		■		■	
7						

ACROSS

1 Went to sleep and had prang in car (7)
5 Kyran __, Irish-born former England scrum-half (7)
6 An arch-enemy (7)
7 ID steed (7)

DOWN

1 Top politicians are in this place to see trophies (7)
2 Mad earl (7)
3 Katsushika __, Japanese woodblock print artist (7)
4 Members of powerful ruling families (7)

Access FT crosswords from the past 30 days – Cryptic, Polymath, Weekend and Sunday Puzzles – on ft.com/crosswordapp

WORD CIRCLE

NO 97

How many words can you form that use the centre letter plus two or more of the other letters? No letter may be used more times than it appears within the circle. There is one word that uses all nine letters.

I
L S
A H M
E N
D

SCORING
GOOD – 30
GREAT – 40
AMAZING – 55

BINARY PUZZLE

NO 97

Place 0 or 1 in every empty square so there is an equal number of each digit in every row and column. In any row or column, there must be no more than two of the same digit in succession.

0		0	0		0		
			0		0	1	1
	0	1		0			0
0	0		0		1	0	
	1	0		0		1	0
0			0		1	0	
1	0	1		0			
		0		0	0		0

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THIS WEEK'S QUIZ ANSWERS

A round on the links
The link was places to live
1. Craven Cottage (Fulham)
2. Semi-colon 3. RadioShack
4. *House of Cards*
5. "Caravan of Love" (The Housemartins)
6. Barnard Castle (Dominic Cummings's drive)
7. The Crystal Palace 8. Pizza Hut
9. Mansion tax 10. Flat

The picture round
Steve McQueen + Anne McElvoy
= Queen Anne

SOLUTIONS

FOR ISSUE DATE
FEBRUARY 14

Mini Crossword No 96

C	A	T	E	R	E	D
O	■	R	■	E	■	I
R	E	A	D	I	N	G
P	■	I	■	S	■	E
S	I	N	U	S	E	S
E	■	E	■	U	■	T
S	T	E	V	E	N	S

Binary Puzzle No 96

1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1
0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0
1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0
0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1
1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0
1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0

Word Circle No 96

abet, bah, bait, ban, bani, banter, bar, bare, barn, bat, bath, bathe, bather, bean, bear, beat, beaten, beater, bee, been, beer, beet, beneath, bent, beret, berth, bet, beta, bier, bin, birth, bit, bite, bra, brain, bran, brat, breath, breathe, brine, habit, herb, **hibernate**, nab, nib, rebate, rib, tab, tribe

THE CROSSWORD

NO 781 SET BY ALDHELM

1	2		3		4		5	■	6		7		8	
■		■		■		■		■		■		■		■
9						■	10							■
■		■		■		■		■		■		■		■
11								■	12					
■		■	■	■		■		■	■	■		■		■
■	13		14			■	15		16					
■	■	■		■		■		■		■		■	■	■
17	18							■	19				20	■
■		■		■	■	■		■		■	■	■		■
21					22	■	23				24			
■		■		■		■		■		■		■		■
■	25							■	26					
■		■		■		■		■		■		■		■
27						■	28							

The Across clues are straightforward, while the Down clues are cryptic.

ACROSS

1 Winter wildflower (8)
6 Statue's base (6)
9 Canada's capital (6)
10 Become worse again (7)
11 Australian member of the parrot family (8)
12 Ancient Rome's XXX (6)
13 Rogue (5)
15 Menace, intimidate (8)
17 Simple long-barrelled weapon (3, 5)
19 Newspapers, magazines etc (5)
21 Peg, tap (6)
23 Forgetfulness (8)
25 Senior politician (7)
26 Pay no attention to (6)
27 Nursery rhyme shepherdess (2-4)
28 Late church service (8)

DOWN

2 Group of associates line up in Kent, perhaps (7)
3 Its a hit with writer (5)
4 Cooked before and sat for Sunday dish (5, 4)
5 Its usual for poacher, perhaps, going around castle with crafty ruse (3, 3, 3, 6)
6 Steer one into bed (5)
7 Connect energy cap with limit that's adjusted (9)
8 Maybe 15 endlessly play here? (7)
14 Superiority of other ranks rising in terrible carnage (9)
16 Pure evil's horrible – ghastly (9)
18 Painting method with current stamp reworked on stucco base (7)
20 Endless entertainment administered with somewhere for money (7)
22 Add exercise – climbing, getting out for a change (3, 2)
24 Goddess is in heaven, usually (5)

Crossword No 780

■	C	O	M	P	A	C	T	D	I	S	C	■	■	■
C	■	M	■	L	■	U	■	I	■	P	■	B	■	S
O	P	E	R	A	■	D	I	S	H	O	N	E	S	T
N	■	G	■	Y	■	G	■	C	■	N	■	H	■	O
C	H	A	U	F	F	E	U	R	■	S	T	O	I	C
E	■	■	■	U	■	L	■	E	■	O	■	L	■	K
D	A	W	D	L	E	■	B	E	G	R	U	D	G	E
E	■	O	■	■	■	D	■	T	■	■	■	E	■	X
D	I	R	E	C	T	O	R	■	S	C	E	N	I	C
E	■	K	■	O	■	R	■	A	■	O	■	■	■	H
F	E	M	U	R	■	M	A	S	S	M	E	D	I	A
E	■	A	■	S	■	O	■	P	■	R	■	R	■	N
A	T	T	R	I	B	U	T	E	■	A	M	O	N	G
T	■	E	■	C	■	S	■	C	■	D	■	N	■	E
■	■	■	P	A	R	E	N	T	H	E	S	E	S	■

GETTY IMAGES; ALAMY

A ROUND ON THE LINKS

BY JAMES WALTON

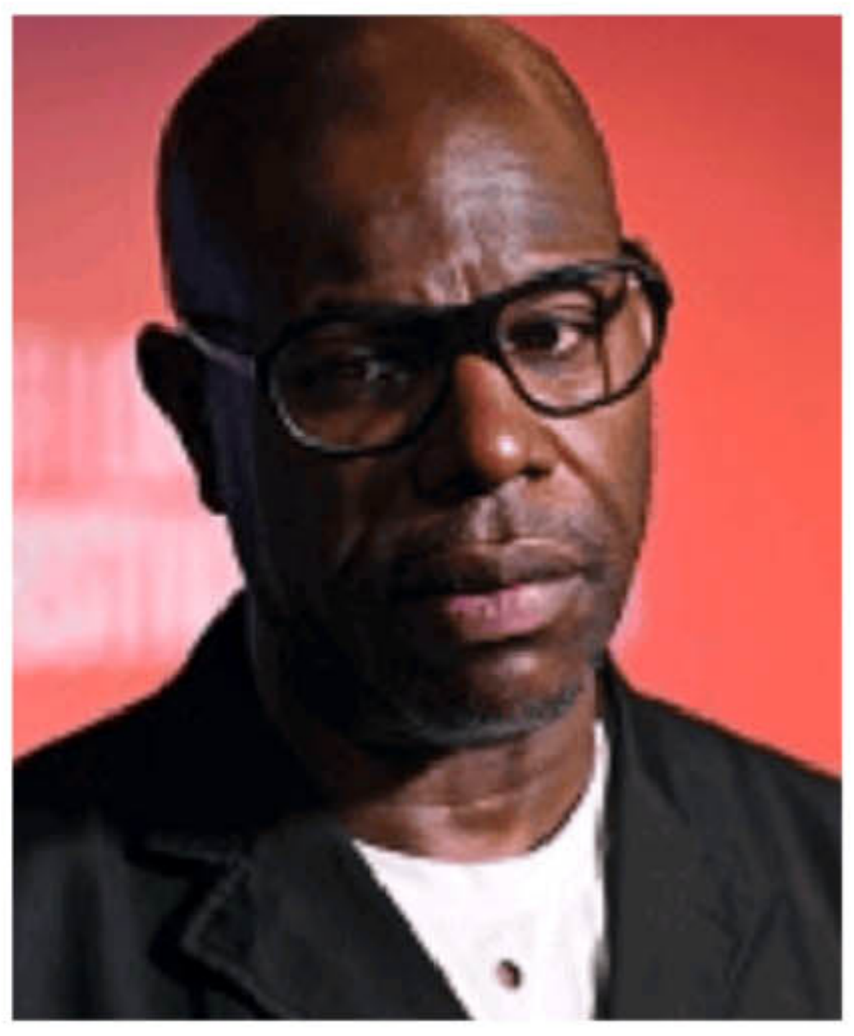
All the answers here are linked in some way. Once you've spotted the connection, any you didn't know the first time around should become easier.

1 Which stadium – the home ground of a current Premier League club – has been hosting football matches for longer than any other in London?
2 Which mark of punctuation did George Orwell consider "an unnecessary stop" – and Kurt Vonnegut advise against using, because "all they do is show you've been to college"?
3 In the late 1990s, which American retailer was the biggest electronic goods chain in the world?
4 What was the first Netflix Original series, with all 13 episodes released at once – in a then revolutionary way - on February 1 2013?
5 In the 1980s, two a capella songs reached number one in the UK Charts: "Only You" (The Flying Pickets) – and which other?
6 Which market town on the river Tees (*pictured*) featured prominently in the British news in May 2020?
7 Which building housed the Great Exhibition of 1851?
8 Which chain introduced stuffed crust pizza in 1995, advertised by Donald Trump?
9 What's the nickname of the High Value Council Tax Surcharge, due to come into effect in Britain in 2028?
10 Which musical symbol resembles a lower case B?

THE PICTURE ROUND

BY JAMES WALTON

Who or what do these pictures add up to?



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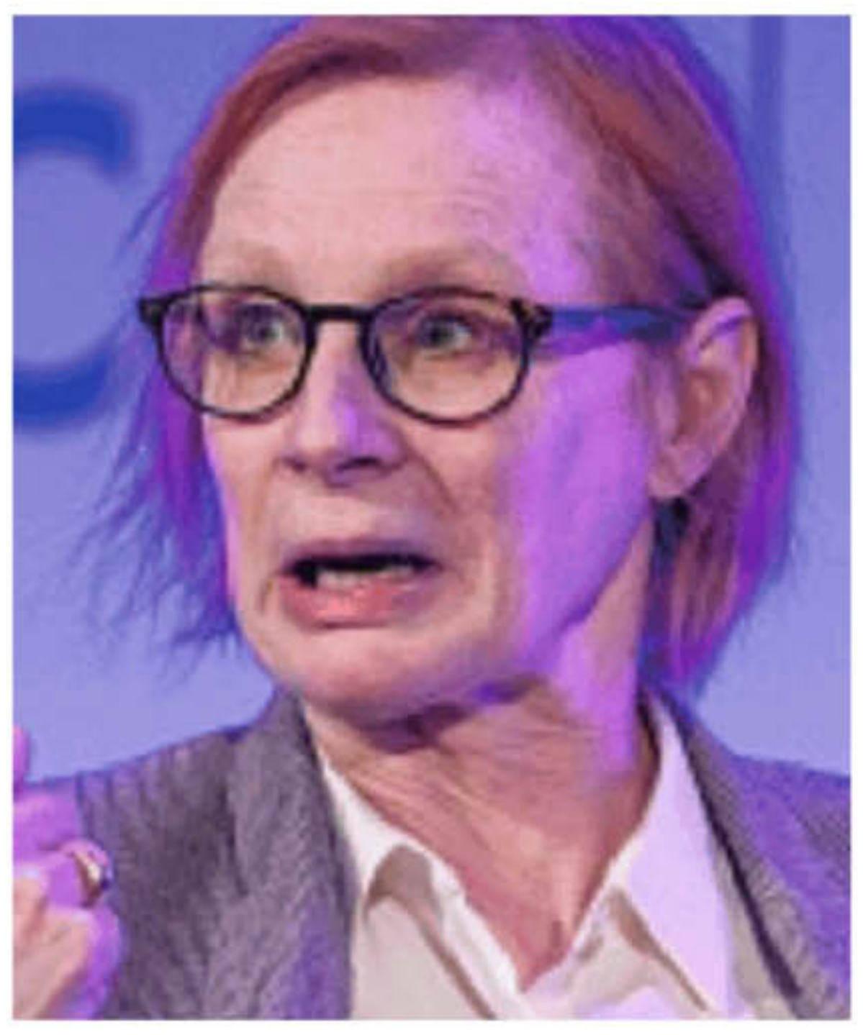


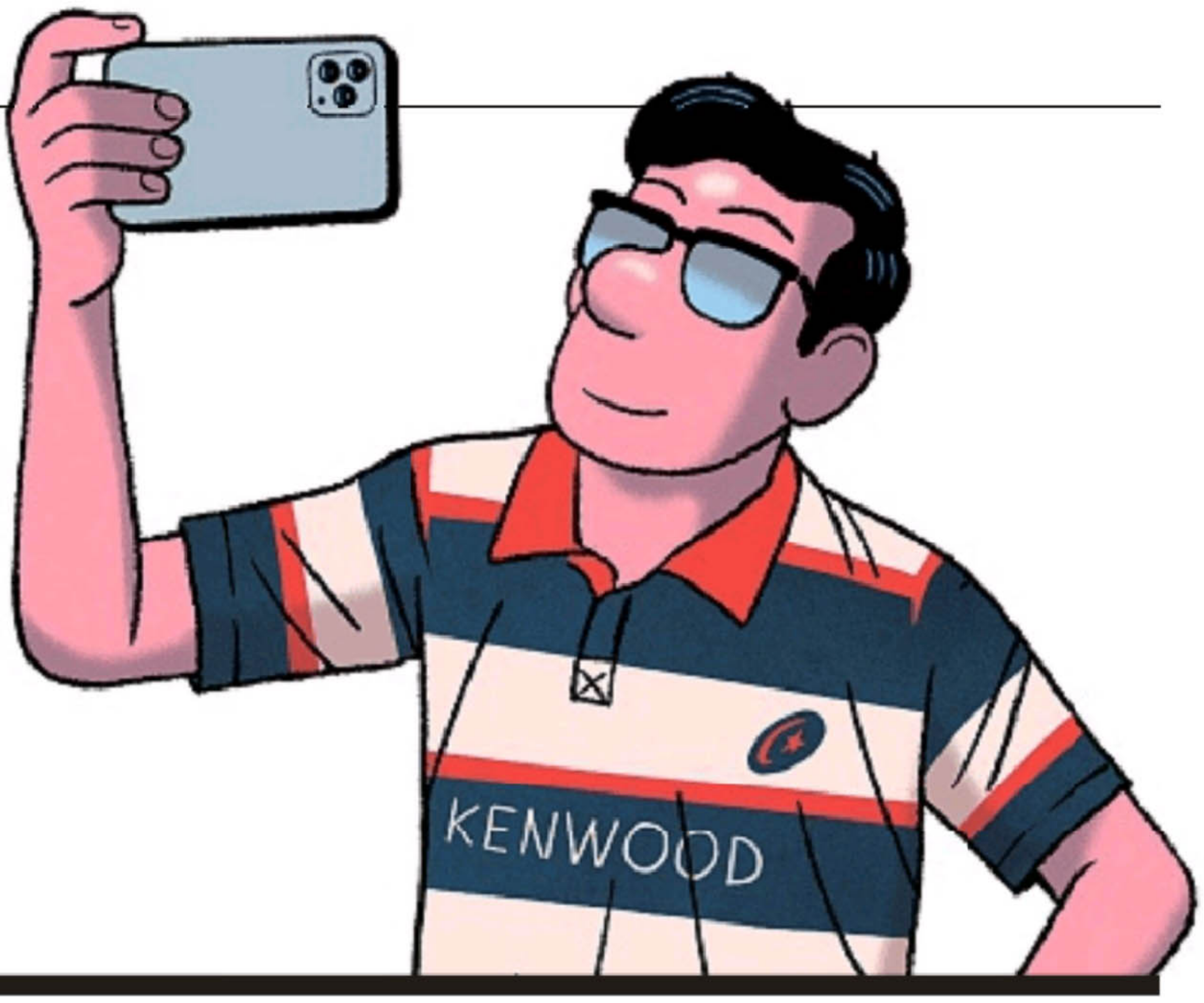
= ?

Answers opposite

What Fresh Hell

Can AI improve my personal life?

Work, life and family dilemmas solved by *Robert Shrimsley*



A fascinating question and one which depends, I suppose, on how apocalyptic your general world view of this soon-to-be-all-pervasive technology is. If, for example, you generally subscribe to the "machines will take over the world and destroy us" school of thought, then AI will improve your personal life only if you have a thing for Terminators. Even then, the joy may be fleeting.

Alternatively, AI could spare the world but render you unemployable for everything except manual work, which would definitely leave a bit of a dent in your LinkedIn profile. But let's for a moment take a walk on the sunny side of the street and assume we avoid the full job, or actual, apocalypse.

There are plenty of reasons to be nervous of AI in our private and social spheres, especially when its direction lies in the hands of people like Mark Zuckerberg. A recent Meta memo floated the idea that a distracting major world crisis is the right moment to relaunch face-recognition technology in its smart glasses.

Now, these glasses will undoubtedly improve life for some wearers. Stalkers, for example. And see it from their point of view. It's such a bore when you spot some attractive potential victim in a bar and have no idea who they are. You might have to follow them home (which I know in your line of work is not necessarily a downside) or hang around within earshot to find out where they work. All seriously off-putting to the uncommitted lurker. But now, if they have any kind of social media profile, you are all set, in the time it takes to say "hey, Meta". Some might think that enabling stalking is a bit of a downside. Take it up with Mark.

Then again, when you get to my age, not all faces stick immediately, especially after a brief encounter, so I can see a harmless upside to recognition tech. Even once the face and name are fixed, there is a welter of secondary info like children's names that I may not remember. I have taken to tapping out little notes on my phone after a meeting for future reference.

How wonderful, then, if the specs identify the approaching figure and spew out the valuable prompts I have previously recorded. Better still, they could also detect someone I dislike across the room, giving me time to detour into another conversation.

> I liked the sound of a moonlight walk in Kew Gardens until I remembered that Valentine's Day is in February

I can also see benefits in the health space. Already, people in restaurants are asking Gemini, Perplexity or ChatGPT for the calorie count. How much better if you could scan the menu and have it block out all the unsuitable dishes, perhaps with encouraging words like, "Not today, fat boy." It's a bit like Ozempic but without the nausea, vomiting or hair loss. There's probably a Grok version that just tells you to cut out the foreign food.

Delegating to AI could probably up your text game in group chats about soccer, though any self-respecting intelligence would find a lot of the football banter beneath its dignity and might want to hand the work to a team of humans in the Far East.

There are other potential wins. AI can remember significant dates but also organise Valentine's Day, birthday gifts or anniversary presents. Having tested ChatGPT for Valentine's Day ideas, I'm not sure I'm ready to delegate this entirely. I liked the sound of a moonlight walk in Kew Gardens until I remembered that Valentine's Day is in February.

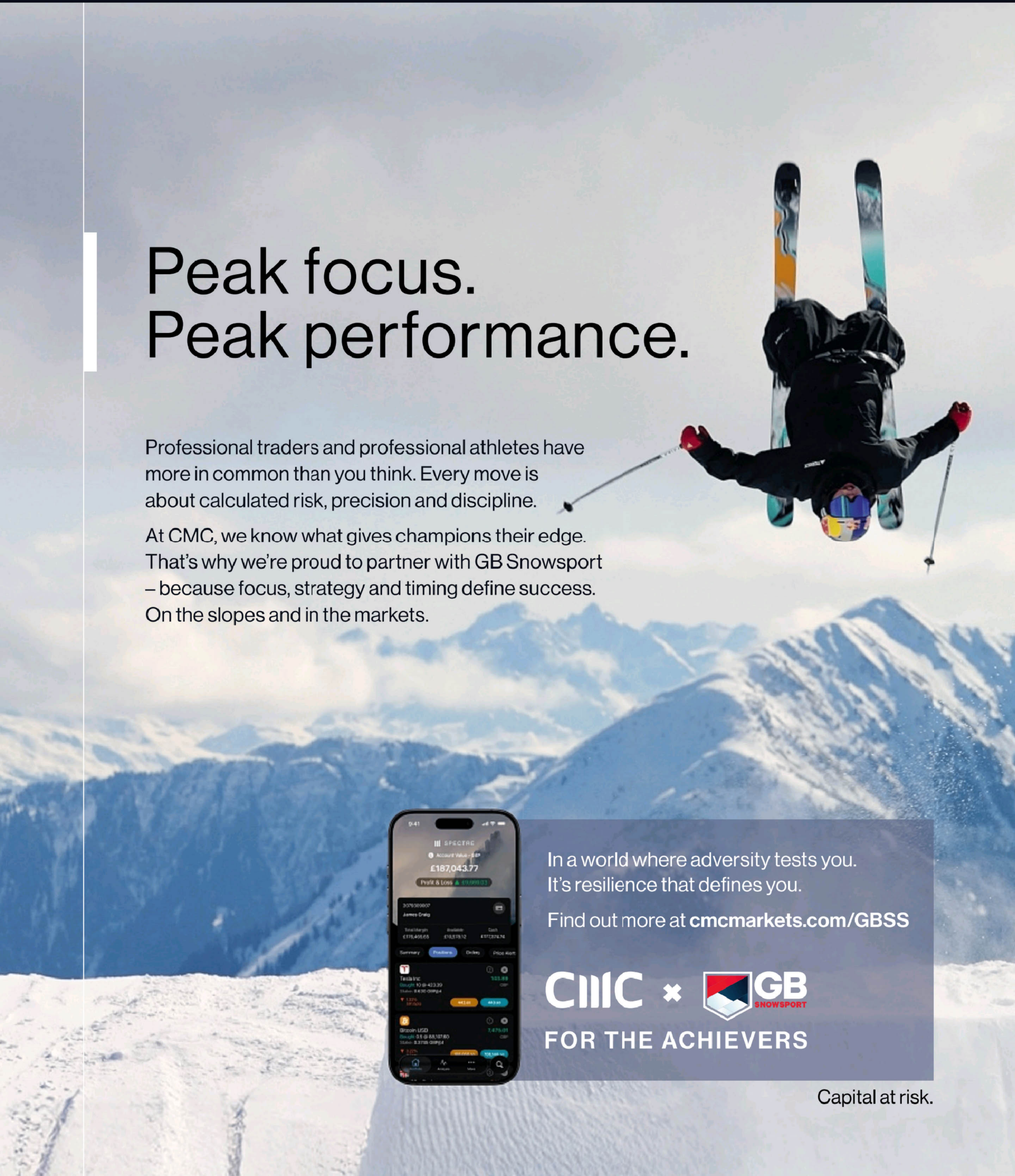
For a birthday present for my wife, it suggested a custom poem or song. This might sound romantic in an Edmond Rostand way, but AI clearly needs to spend a little more time with her before it can truly be trusted.

There must be major opportunities in the dating market. Already, apps like Tinder, Hinge or Bumble are allegedly "integrating AI" to move beyond the basic "nice face, fab abs" model of connection. A thorough crawl of your web footprint ought to allow for far more effective capture of your interests and personality. If we weren't about to ban kids from social media, your ideal match might be found before you've left school – a bit like an arranged marriage but with no grandmothers.

This is only the beginning. In a few years, all these wrinkles will be sorted out. My only advice is to watch out for dates whose profile describes them as a T-1000 made from a mimetic liquid metal alloy. They may not see you as a keeper. FT

ILLUSTRATION *by* LUCAS VARELA

EMAIL ROBERT *at* MAGAZINELETTERS@FT.COM



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